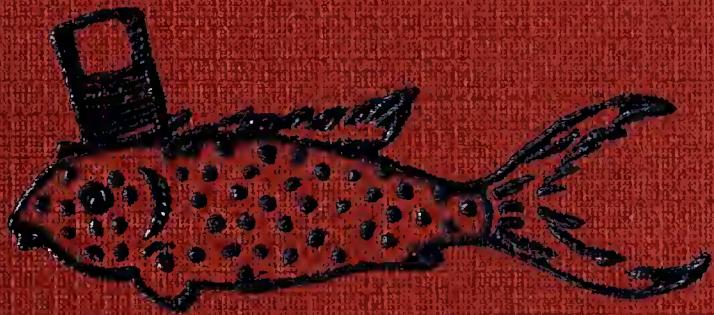


JERRY TODD'S UP-THE-LADDER CLUB



BY LEO EDWARDS



Road to Ashton →

\$3.00

N

W

E

S

Depot



Chicago and Rock Island R.R.

L Street

Poppy's
Pickle
Parlor.

Street

Factory district

Main Street

Street

Street

Stores

Church



Canal

Old
Carriage factory



School Street

Stores

Tutter
Times

Canal

Jewelry
Store

Grant St.

Poppy's
home

Elm St.

To Ashton →



TUTTER

ILLINOIS

JERRY TODD'S
UP-THE-LADDER CLUB

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**“DON’T LET HER IN,” GASPED THE GIRL, FRANTICALLY
CLUTCHING MY ARM.**

Jerry Todd’s Up-the-Ladder Club

Frontispiece (Page 176)

JERRY TODD'S UP-THE-LADDER CLUB

By

LEO EDWARDS

AUTHOR OF

THE JERRY TODD BOOKS
THE POPPY OTT BOOKS

ILLUSTRATED BY

MYRTLE SHELDON

**GROSSET & DUNLAP
PUBLISHERS : : NEW YORK**

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Printed in the United States of America

TO MY PAL
DONALD RUMPF

MORE FUN FOR YOU!

THIS book, I trust, will bring you a lot of fun and pleasant reading. But your fun needn't stop there.

Boys and girls love to get up lodges—I know that from my experience with our Freckled Goldfish Club. During the lifetime of this club I mailed boys and girls more than 3,000 organization booklets and upwards of 25,000 individual membership cards and buttons.

But here in this book you have the ritualistic work for a club far ahead of the Freckled Goldfish in scope and purpose. I know that many Up-the-Ladder clubs will be organized. That is the added fun which *you* may have.

Boys and girls everywhere are privileged to use the material in this book in the organization of Up-the-Ladder clubs of their own in homes and schools, just so long as these clubs are conducted for a helpful purpose. I simply ask this: before organizing a club, please write to me for official permission, as I want to keep a record of all branch clubs, giving each club an official number. You will want your own club to be registered, so please write to me for your number.

Sincerely,

LEO EDWARDS,

Cambridge, Wisconsin.

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LEO EDWARDS' BOOKS

Here is a list of Leo Edwards'
published books:

THE JERRY TODD SERIES

- JERRY TODD AND THE WHISPERING MUMMY
- JERRY TODD AND THE ROSE-COLORED CAT
- JERRY TODD AND THE OAK ISLAND TREASURE
- JERRY TODD AND THE WALTZING HEN
- JERRY TODD AND THE TALKING FROG
- JERRY TODD AND THE PURRING EGG
- JERRY TODD IN THE WHISPERING CAVE
- JERRY TODD, PIRATE
- JERRY TODD AND THE BOB-TAILED ELEPHANT
- JERRY TODD, EDITOR-IN-GRIEF
- JERRY TODD, CAVEMAN
- JERRY TODD AND THE FLYING FLAPDOODLE
- JERRY TODD AND THE BUFFALO BILL BATHTUB
- JERRY TODD'S UP-THE-LADDER CLUB

THE POPPY OTT SERIES

- POPPY OTT AND THE STUTTERING PARROT
- POPPY OTT'S SEVEN-LEAGUE STILTS
- POPPY OTT AND THE GALLOPING SNAIL
- POPPY OTT'S PEDIGREED PICKLES
- POPPY OTT AND THE FRECKLED GOLDFISH
- POPPY OTT AND THE TITTERING TOTEM
- POPPY OTT AND THE PRANCING PANCAKE
- POPPY OTT HITS THE TRAIL
- POPPY OTT & Co., INFERIOR DECORATORS

JERRY TODD'S UP-THE-LADDER CLUB

CHAPTER I

THE NEW GOAT

RED MEYERS was laid up in bed with a bad cold.

"Now's the time for you to tackle your pa for a stove," I told him, when I dropped in on him one Saturday morning in early November.

We had been working for weeks in his big haymow, intending, when we got it cleaned up and wallboarded, to start a secret lodge there, but it was so cold up there now we couldn't even finish the wallboarding to say nothing of holding lodge meetings there.

Mr. Meyers came in while I was there.

"Hello, Jerry Todd," he greeted in his usual jolly way. "How are you feeling to-day?"

"Swell," I told him.

"Well," he advised, "you hadn't better stay up here too long or you'll get what Donald's got."

I gave Red the wink.

"Shall I put on the rest of that wallboard to-day?" I asked him, from the doorway.

"You'll find it plenty cold up in the haymow, Jerry," he sniffled.

"We should have a stove up there," I told him.

"Yes, I wouldn't be laid up like this if we'd had a little heat up there. That's where I caught my cold all right."

"If we had a stove we'd be careful with it too, wouldn't we, Red?"

"I'd give my word of honor on that," he vowed.

Mr. Meyers coughed dryly.

"I don't suppose, by any chance, that you two eggs are putting on this program for my benefit," he drawled, his eyes amused.

"We *would* like a stove," I told him, grinning hopefully.

"How much more wallboarding have you got to do up there, Jerry?" he asked.

"Just a little spot near the door."

"Well, I'll take a look up there to-day and see if a stove could be set up safely, for I'd rather pay added fuel bills than doctor bills. But you'd better run along now or you'll get the sniffles yourself."

I put in the balance of the day looking for a

goat, Red picking up the search with me when he got out the following Monday, his father having definitely promised to get us a stove. Oh, boy, were we ever going to have fun, we told ourselves, when we got the stove and got our new lodge going! Red had told his pa that we preferred a flat-topped stove that we could pop corn on, but more than that we planned on cooking whole meals up there, just like in camping. We could have books and games up there too! It sure was going to be a grand and glorious winter all right!

Mother tried to dissuade me when she learned that Red and I were looking for a lodge goat, telling me that lodges didn't have real goats. "Riding the goat," she explained, was just an expression, and we'd be foolish to spend four or five dollars for a goat just for use in an occasional initiation. We had better save our money, she advised, or spend it for something more sensible. But Red and I had set our hearts on a real goat, though it began to look, as November advanced, as though we'd have to finally start our lodge without one. We had been to every farm within two miles of town without the slightest sign of a goat or the least information about the possible whereabouts of one.

It took Mr. Meyers longer than he thought to

find the right kind of a stove for us, so one warm Saturday Red and I set to work in our lodge room to complete the wallboarding there.

Scoop Ellery came in while we were pounding away.

"Who's getting married?" he asked good-naturedly, turning his sharp black eyes around.

"We're fixing up a lodge room," I told him.

"I thought maybe someone was going to housekeeping," he laughed.

"Anybody could." Red looked at his work proudly.

"We did all this wallboarding ourselves," I told Scoop, with the same pride.

"It looks it," he grunted.

"What's the matter with it?" I stiffened.

"Why didn't you put it on straight?" He looked around critically.

"It'll look all right when we get it painted," I growled, feeling that he should have praised the job even if it was a little bit crooked. Boys our age couldn't be expected to take old wallboard (it had come out of Red's pa's picture theatre down town) and put it back on again perfectly.

"Yes," Red told Scoop glowingly, "we're going to paint it to look like the inside of a stone castle."

"What for?" Scoop wanted to know.
Red laughed mysteriously.

"You'll find out when we initiate you, won't he, Jerry?"

"And how!" I giggled.

"Is it going to cost me anything to join?"
Scoop spoke cautiously.

"Well, shouldn't it be worth something," I argued, "to have a nice warm club-room like this?"

"And get a ride on a real goat?" Red chimed in, hopeful yet of getting one.

"Can anybody join?" Scoop asked, his interest growing.

"Not anybody," I told him. "But you can."

"Peg Shaw, too?"

"Sure thing."

"Well, let me join first," Scoop begged eagerly, "for I want to have the fun of initiating Peg. Boy, I'd like to see him on a goat! I'd be tempted to put a bur under the goat's tail."

If you have read the other books that I have written you know all about big Peg Shaw. Sturdy and muscular, he's the gritty one who always carries us through to victory when some other gang corners us with acorns or wet cobs. We've had some nice gooey tomato battles too, for we live in a small country town where you

can do such things. Tutter is just a dot on the Illinois map, but to us it's the swellest town in the whole world and we think we've got the swellest gang in the whole world too. We're all in the same grade at school and our fathers are all in different businesses, none of them wealthy but able to give us everything we need.

My own Dad runs a brickyard that my Grand-father Todd started on the west side of town and some day, I suppose, I'll have a part in running this brickyard. But before then I have a lot of schooling to attend to and a lot of growing-up to do. Do you know what my swell Dad says about that? Often he tells me: "Jerry, don't try to grow up too fast. You'll never be a boy but once so be a boy—the right kind of a boy—and enjoy a boy's fun just as long as you can."

I guess Dad had a lot of fun himself when he was a boy for he knows what a fellow runs up against in school and out and always looks at things in the right way. Mother, who is more inclined to worry, says he's too easy-going with me. For instance, she didn't like it a little bit that time I joined the Juvenile Jupiter Detective Club and set out to solve the "Whispering Mummy" mystery. Detective work, she declared, not only was beyond me but too risky for

me. It was a man's work, she said, not a boy's. But Dad gave me the wink, which meant that he was willing to take a chance on me keeping out of danger. Maybe he thought I couldn't do any detecting anyway, being just a boy as Mother had said. But I fooled him! After the "Mummy" case I helped solve some other mysteries too, till now he has a lot of confidence in my ability to do such things and take care of myself while doing it.

Scoop's father runs a general store, the biggest one in town, and Peg's father paints and decorates. As I have already mentioned, Red's father has a moving-picture theatre, which gives you a pretty good picture of us all, our parents included.

So far I haven't said a word about Horse Foot, as at the time my story began he and I were on the outs, but as we were to learn that morning that he had found a goat where we had failed (Gr-r-r!) I probably better stop here and tell you something about him.

His real name is Sammy Rail—or to give you it all, Samuel Horace Butterfield Rail. We call him Horse Foot because when he's out with us he always plods along behind with the weary actions of an old plow-horse. Living next door to me on Main street, and several years

younger, he usually pesters me to death, stopping for me every school morning and on Saturday hanging around from breakfast till bed-time. I suppose it was mean of me, but to get rid of him I had lately told him that our new lodge was just for big boys, which sent him off offended.

On top of stuttering, he's built like a sofa pillow with a string tied around it, with about as much expression to his moon-like face as the bottom of a dish-pan. I'm not trying to criticize him for stuttering—that was an unfortunate handicap—but he made a show of it, saying some things sometimes that made you wonder if he had any brains at all. “P-p-pickled pigs feet!” That's some of his supposedly bright stuff, and “K-k-ketchup and beans!” He'll come around a corner, and instead of saying “Hello,” like any boy with ordinary brains would, he dishes out that “P-p-pickled pigs feet” stuff of his, thinking it's smart.

“Where in the world did he get a goat?” I asked Scoop when he came running back just before noon with the unexpected news.

“Yes,” Red put in, “how could *he* find a goat when *we* couldn't? That doesn't make sense to me.”

“Well, whether it makes sense or not, he's

got a goat," laughed Scoop. "I just saw him going down the street with it."

"Was it a big goat?" I asked enviously.

"I never saw a bigger one."

"Wouldn't that put a crimp in your Aunt Emma's spinal column!" growled Red, completely disgusted. "Here we've been searching for a goat for almost two weeks—and then that dumb cluck steps in and buys one right from under our nose! Get me an aspirin—quick!"

"Did he tell you where he got it?" I asked Scoop.

"No, I didn't get a chance to ask him—he had too many kids hanging around him."

"But what *did* he tell you?—anything at all?"

"He said you were mad at him."

"I can patch that up," I spoke confidently.

"I'm not so sure about that, myself," laughed Scoop. "I think you've got a little competition on your hands, Jerry. With all of his dumb looks, that boy has ideas too."

Mother laughed all through dinner about the new goat next door, Mrs. Rail having been over with a tale of woe a mile long. But I still wasn't able to find out where the goat had come from or much about it except that Horse Foot had got it against his parents' wishes, and already (ac-

cording to Mrs. Rail's hectic report) it had chewed its way through seven geraniums, a rubber plant and two hair brushes.

"But I don't feel very sorry for her," Mother concluded the amusing story. "She could get rid of the goat if she wanted to set her foot down. Certainly I wouldn't put up with anything like that myself. But she's just as easy as her husband when it comes to that boy. I can't imagine what they're thinking of, giving in to him that way. He practically runs the house—he and his little sister together. I sometimes think Mrs. Rail lets them run over her that way so she can have something to lament about to me, for she certainly loves to run on about her family—and how smart her children are and how their teachers always call on them to recite to visitors."

"Did she tell you that?" I snorted.

"Yes, I've heard it many times," laughed Mother. "But from what I've seen of Sammy myself I can't picture any sane teacher selecting him to show off to visitors except possibly Mrs. Rail herself. Still he *is* an interesting little boy. I'm quite fond of him myself with all of his spoiled ways. He's so droll."

"He's a pain in the neck," I growled.

"Well, for goodness' sake don't ever blurt

out anything like that in front of Mrs. Rail," Mother told me hastily. "She'd have seventeen spasms. If he's perfect to her let her keep on thinking so and make her think you enjoy his company. It's a fact, Jerry, you do save her a lot of worries."

"How?" I asked, surprised.

"She thinks Sammy's perfectly safe with you. She thinks you enjoy looking after him. So for the sake of peace in the neighborhood, don't ever do anything, Jerry, to lessen her confidence in you."

"Did she say anything about Horse Foot getting up a lodge?" I asked eagerly.

"A lodge?" Mother repeated.

"Like the one that Red and I are getting up."

"No," laughed Mother, shaking her head, "nothing was said about a lodge—the talk was mostly about rubber plants and hair brushes, though I can't make myself believe that the goat actually ate the hair brushes as she thinks. Sammy probably hid them to tease her. He's full of tricks."

As though I didn't already know it!

"Well," asked Red, when I got back after dinner, "have you seen the new goat yet?"

"No, but I heard plenty about it this noon."

I told him about the rubber plant and hair brushes.

"The goat won't last long over there," I predicted, "if that keeps up. So all we've got to do is to sit quiet and wait for events to take their natural course. Whatever Horse Foot's scheme was in buying it, we may get it for nothing in the end if we just show a little patience."

We did our first wall painting that afternoon, Mr. Meyers later sending up a tinner to put in a safe metal chimney for us. Now, with the stove and the goat, we'd be ready to go!

"By the way," said Red, when we separated that night with almost as much paint on us as on the wall, "what are we going to call our new lodge?"

I had a name for it all right, but I thought I'd give him first chance.

"What do you suggest?" I countered.

"I suppose we could call it the Boy Masons of America," he considered.

"Yes, that's a good name," I nodded.

"Still it isn't very original," he confessed.

"How about Up-the-Ladder?" I suggested.

"Huh?" he stared.

"Up-the-Ladder," I repeated, grinning.

"Up-the-Ladder?" he repeated after me. "I never heard of a lodge with a name like that."

"Well, you wanted something original," I told him, my eyes dancing.

"Up-the-Ladder?" he repeated again. "But I don't see any sense to it, Jerry. What are you going to do, make the candidates climb a ladder?"

I whispered to him intently for a few minutes.

"Oh!" said he, his eyes swelling. "Oh, gee! That's swell, Jerry! Oh, boy, that's great!"

If you could have seen him then with his fiery hair all messed up and his mouth spread clear across that freckled impish face of his you would better understand why I like him so well.

He's hot-headed and stubborn at times, and often downright unreasonable, but with all of that he's the best pal I ever have had or ever hope to have. And I had the happy feeling now, as I set out for my home at the other end of the block, that we were starting out together on some of the best fun we ever had had.

That we were soon to encounter a mystery too, and an adventure that could easily have ended seriously for us, never once entered my mind.

CHAPTER II

AT SCHOOL

"WELL, what's the latest news from next door?" I asked Mother, when I came in for supper that night.

"They've all gone away," she laughed.

"Gone away where?" I asked. "To stock up again with rubber plants and hair brushes?"

"To the country, I believe. They drove away about an hour ago with Sammy and his sister pulling hair to see who'd have the honor of riding in the back seat with the goat."

There was a swell moving picture on down town that night and after supper I got Red and went down, sitting through the whole show twice, with peanuts, and getting two hamburgers afterwards. So it was pretty late when I finally got home.

Horse Foot's house was still in total darkness. But they could all be in bed, I told myself, wondering if Horse Foot and the goat on their return had gone to bed together, or if it had been tied up for the night in their barn. For a

second or two I was tempted to go over to the barn and peek, than I stiffened. Peek nothing! And into the house I went with my nose up. Anyway, I told myself, I'd probably see Horse Foot out in the street with the goat as soon as it got daylight, so there was no need of me snooping around in the dark.

But in that I got left, for throughout Sunday there was no sign of life next door except a faint wisp of smoke from the chimney, nor did Horse Foot come over to see me when he got home late Sunday night, as I thought he might do, or stop in the next morning to walk to school with me. However, I didn't let that bother me, though I'll have to confess that by now I was burning with curiosity to see for myself what the goat was like and learn if possible what Horse Foot's racket in connection with it was.

"When are you and Red going to have that initiation?" Scoop Ellery tackled me eagerly at school.

"We haven't got a stove yet," I told him.

"Oh, yes, we have," Red laughed, coming up.
"Pa set it up yesterday."

"One with a flat top?" I asked eagerly.

"Yes, and I've popped corn on it already. It works slick, Jerry."

"I'll come this noon and see it," I told him.

"How about cooking our supper up there to-night?" he suggested.

"That suits me," I assented eagerly.

"I'll get some beefsteak and you can bring over some potatoes."

"How about some baked beans?" I further suggested.

"Yes, bring a can of baked beans—and some ketchup. Ask your ma for some old frying pans too, Jerry, that we can keep, for we'll want to do a lot of cooking up there, I imagine, from now on."

"Hey, wait a minute!" Scoop cut in, his eyes alternating eagerly between us. "Don't I get in on that?"

"Not till you're a duly elected member of the U-T-L," I told him laughingly.

"The U-T-L?" he repeated. "Utility—what?"

"The U isn't for utility," I corrected. "It's for Up."

"Up what?"

"Up-the-Ladder."

"Yes," Red swung in, with a grin splitting the whole front of his face, "that's the name of our lodge—Up-the-Ladder. And maybe, Scoop, we *will* initiate you to-night if we can get on the good side of Horse Foot and get his goat."



LOGE GOTE
S.PESAUL TRAINED BY
HORSE FOOT RAIL
HAS GOOD HORNS AND BUNTS GOOD--
BUNTS LITTLE KIDS 15 FEET AND BIG
KIDS 10 FEET -- ALSO BITES, KIKS,
STAMPS AND EATS HARE BRUSHES
FOUR RENT

#10 PUR NISHASHUN

HORSE FOOT'S HAND MADE POSTER.

Jerry Todd's Up-the-Ladder Club

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Peg Shaw, coming up, had heard this.

"Here's a goat for you," he laughed, handing us a hand-made poster.

"Where did you get it?" I asked, after a moment's blank stare at it.

"Horse Foot handed it to me down the street."

I turned furiously to Red.

"I guess you can see now what his game is—the little gyp!"

A copy of the poster is shown on the opposite page.

"Ten dollars!" read Red, his eyes swelling. "Well, I guess there won't be any initiation tonight at that price."

"No," chimed in Scoop, "not if the ten dollars comes out of my pocket."

"What ten dollars are you talking about?" Peg looked from one to the other of us puzzled.

"Read the poster," I growled.

"I have read it, but I don't know what it means."

"Well," I went on savagely, "it means that Horse Foot thinks he's got us in a corner. He's got the only goat in town, and he thinks we'll pay him a big price for it to use in a lodge that we just got up in Red's haymow. Ten dollars!" I exploded, with another contemptuous look at

the poster. "I bet that's double what he paid for the goat himself, for we didn't expect to pay more than five dollars—did we, Red?"

"Five dollars is a great plenty," growled Red.

"And Horse Foot thinks we'll pay him ten dollars for each initiation!" I further blew up. "He must think he's dealing with millionaires."

"Bunts little kids fifteen feet and big kids ten feet," Peg read, laughing. "Evidently Horse Foot has been trying it out on some of the kids, with a tape measure."

"It says, special trained by Horse Foot Rail," laughed Scoop. "He should know."

"S-p-e-s-h-u-l," spelt Peg, more amused every minute. "Say, his teacher ought to see that. She'd probably keep him after school for a few nights to brush up on his spelling."

"And h-a-r-e," spelt Scoop.

"There is a h-a-r-e," said Peg.

"But he means the other kind, for it says, kicks, stamps and eats hair brushes. It couldn't be hare brushes—for h-a-r-e is a rabbit."

"Some goat," Peg laughed at the crazy picture.

"Piledriver, IV," Scoop read the name. "I wonder what the IV means."

"It means he's Piledriver the fourth," Peg figured it out, with a continued broad grin. "Evidently his father, grandfather and great-grandfather were Piledrivers ahead of him. Well, with a family background like that he ought to be pretty good."

"And what are *you* looking so thoughtful about?" I asked Red, who stood staring at the poster like an old sage.

"I'm trying to figure out what that kid's game really is. It can't be money, for dumb as he is he couldn't expect us to pay him ten dollars an initiation, no matter how badly we needed a goat."

"Shall I make up with him and find out?"

"Yes, why don't you, Jerry?—for you've got to make up with him sooner or later anyway, living right next door to him. As you said last Saturday, we may get the goat for a gift in the end, but why wait? Why not make up with him now so we can get the goat right away?"

"What'll I tell him if he wants to join?"

"Tell him yes—of course. But put him off a couple of weeks if you can so we can take in Scoop and Peg first. Or if he holds out for money we'll just have to talk it over."

"I'm willing to give him a quarter," Scoop offered eagerly.

"Is it going to cost us anything after we join?" Peg wanted to know.

"Ten cents a week," I told him.

"Wough!" he exploded, in his rough way.
"That's pretty steep."

"But wait till you see our lodge room," I told him.

"Yes, Peg," Scoop put in, "they've got it all wallboarded and plan to heat it this winter."

"You can't keep up a place like that for nothing," I told Peg.

"All right," he agreed, "I'll cough up my dime when it's time. But there goes the last bell —come on, or we'll all be late."

Horse Foot, of course, was in another room, so I didn't get a chance to work on him till recess.

"Hi," I cried, running up to him chummily, half expecting him to turn and run away from me, but he didn't.

"The t-t-teacher says I'm dumb," he gloomed, his nose looking puggier than ever between his ripe-tomato cheeks.

"Oh, no!" I fawned on him, with a long face. "How could she ever think anything like that? You must be mistaken."

"She s-s-said, how many days in the year, and I s-s-said seven."

Oh, oh! It made me stagger, but I still kept a straight face.

"You should have said three hundred and sixty-five," I coached him, "with an extra one for leapyear."

"No," he said, looking at me as though he was ashamed to think that anybody he knew could be so dumb, "there's only s-s-seven—Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and S-s-saturday."

I drew a long breath.

"Let's go over there by the schoolhouse and sit down," I suggested weakly.

"W-w-what's the matter with you?" he asked, with an anxious look at me. "Don't you feel well?"

Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, Friday and Saturday! But that's a good example of what you get around *him*. Was it really dumbness? I found myself wondering, bewildered. Then as I thought of how crazy it was I started to laugh.

"My m-m-ma thinks I'm funny too," he smirked.

I braced myself to go on. I was after the goat, I told myself doggedly, and must stand anything to get it, even this!

"P-p-pickled pigs feet," he further entertained me.

"Stop!" I gurgled, bending over with the best imitation of a side-splitting laugh that I could give. "Don't say any more or I'll bust a button."

But he was going too good to stop.

"K-k-ketchup and beans," he piled up the comedy.

Of course I had to squeeze out another laugh.

"Ho, ho, ho!" I roared, slapping him on the back. "Ho, ho, ho! You're a scream, you little fat rascal!"

"And n-n-now that that's over with," said he briskly, changing in a flash, his eyes pointed, "let's g-g-get down to business."

"Huh?" I stared, caught off guard.

"I k-k-know what you want," said he, with a businesslike air. "You want to use m-m-my goat."

"I thought maybe you'd let us borrow it," I told him weakly, realizing that further pretended flattery would be wasted on him.

"After what you s-s-said the other day? B-b-boloney!"

"Aw, come on, Horse Foot!" I coaxed, slipping an arm around him. "I'm sorry. Be a pal."

“T-t-ten dollars,” he said flatly, wriggling away from me.

“Please, Horse Foot!” I further begged.
“I’ve done a lot for you.”

“T-t-ten dollars.”

“I’ll give you a quarter,” I tried to bargain with him.

“T-t-ten dollars.”

“And later on you can join our lodge yourself—after we’ve initiated Scoop and Peg.”

“T-t-ten dollars,” he kept it up like a phonograph needle in a rut.

“Don’t you want to join our lodge?” I asked him, puzzled by his dogged resistance.

“S-s-sure,” he confessed, beaming.

“Then be reasonable. I was just kidding you the other day when I told you our lodge was just for big boys. I’ve always let you in on my fun. And you know we can’t afford to pay you ten dollars. Why, we could buy a goat of our own for half of that.”

“Buy it w-w-where?” he asked quickly, his eyes foxy now.

Yes, where? That was the question. He knew he had the advantage.

“I’ll give you thirty cents,” I came up five cents.

“T-t-ten dollars,” he stood firm.

I was getting mad now.

"Listen, you pie-eyed, over-stuffed shrimp," I stood up to him, fists clenched, "you're going to get that pug-nose of yours pushed through the back of your head if you don't use a little reason. You owe me a lot. Now I want that goat of yours, and if you know what's good for you you'll let me have it."

"S-s-sure," said he, beaming. "You can have it."

I thought I had him cowed!

"For nothing?" I asked gleefully.

"N-n-no," he slowly shook his head, peculiarly sober now. "N-n-not for nothing, Jerry."

"How much then?" I asked, thinking it would be around thirty or forty cents at the most. Even that was a lot of money for boys like us to get together for an initiation.

"T-t-ten dollars," said he finally.

Then do you know what I did?—gee, I was ashamed of it afterwards! Boiling over, I pushed him in the face, knocking him over backwards.

He was crying when I left him.

CHAPTER III

PILEDRIVER'S ESCAPE

THE other fellows were pretty chilly when I joined them.

"What did you push him down for?" growled Peg, looking at me as though he didn't think very much of me at the moment.

"Oh," I cried, still mad, "I couldn't do anything with him. I offered him a quarter, then thirty cents, but all he could say was ten dollars, ten dollars, ten dollars. Finally it made me mad—and I gave him a shove."

"But you needn't have shoved him so hard," growled Peg. "Look at him!—he's got a bloody nose. Gosh! A big cow like you!"

"Yes," put in Red, with his nose up, "why don't you go up in Canada with a baseball bat and start batting those quinces around?"

"Quinces?" laughed Peg.

"That's short for quintuplets," Red explained.

"A quince is something you make jelly out of," laughed Peg.

"I don't care if you make watermelon pickles out of it," yelled Red. "Jerry knows what I mean—the big *baby pusher!*"

A teacher came out then.

"Why, Sammy, what's the matter?" she asked anxiously, bending over him as he sniffed and wiped. "What happened to you, dear?"

Horse Foot looked across at me.

"I f-f-fell down," he told the teacher, shielding me.

Peg eyed me steadily, more disgusted than ever with me.

"He should have told on you, you big bully! —that's what you deserved."

"I wish he had," I replied, miserable now.

Scoop went over and took Horse Foot's arm.

"Come on in the basement," he said kindly, "and I'll help you wash up."

I trailed along behind, more miserable every minute. This was what a fellow got for losing his temper, I censored myself, determined never to let it happen again, and realizing how ashamed Mother and Dad would be of me if they heard about it.

"Let *me* clean him up," I told Scoop, stepping in. "I feel I should."

"S-s-sure thing," Horse Foot grinned, "let Jerry d-d-do it."

He wasn't a bit sore at me!—the little egg! And I realized then, as I worked with him, that he really meant a lot to me.

On the way upstairs I told him about the stove we had in our lodge room and how Red and I were going to cook our supper up there that night.

"You can come over too if you want to," I invited, figuring that I owed it to him.

"Shall I bring P-p-piledriver?" he asked, his eyes dancing.

"Sure thing, bring him along," I laughed, "for I'm anxious to get a look at him."

"S-s-say, Jerry," he asked, wistfully eager, "is t-t-ten dollars too much for him?"

"Let's not start that all over again," I evaded.

"I b-b-bet you're mad again," he soberly searched my face.

"I was," I admitted, "but I'm all over it now. I was wrong too, for he's your goat and what you do with him is your own business, not mine."

"I've g-g-got to raise ten dollars," he told me, his mouth setting doggedly.

Oh! So that was it!—a case of necessity!

"I thought you were just acting greedy," I told him.

"It's f-f-for glasses."

"Glasses?" I searched his eyes. "What do you mean?"

He showed me with his circled thumbs and fingers.

"Glasses—t-t-to see through—like this."

"For yourself?" I asked surprised. I couldn't imagine why he should have to buy his own glasses, if he needed them. His parents had always bought him plenty of everything else.

He started to say something, his eyes suddenly troubled, but stopped as the bell tapped, summoning us back to our classes.

"I'll t-t-tell you to-night." He ran off.

I asked Mother that noon if she could spare a couple of old kettles or frying pans, explaining about our stove in Red's barn and how we planned occasionally to cook our meals up there. Later I rushed over to see the stove myself.

It had two cooking holes on top, with regular iron lids, one in front and the other behind, but unlike most stoves it hadn't any grate, evidently having been built years ago, for both light cooking and heating, when the only available fuel was chunk wood. To get the ashes out we had to open a door in front (where the wood went in) and get in with a fire-shovel. Narrow and long, the stove stood on four curved iron

legs, about six inches from the floor, and for protection Mr. Meyers had put down a big sheet of galvanized iron.

Red built a fire in the odd-shaped stove to show me how it worked, and in no time at all I could feel the heat coming out. Oh, boy! I could imagine how cozy it would be up there now on even the coldest winter nights. We sure had some dandy fun, I told myself gleefully.

"Have we got time to cook something?" I asked eagerly, when the top got hot.

"I wish we could," Red spoke with the same eagerness. "I guess though we better wait till to-night, when we'll have more time. But you can see how swell it's going to be for popcorn."

"And how!"

"We can fix up a cupboard to keep our stuff in and always keep popcorn and butter on hand," he planned.

"Yes, it'll be fun making a cupboard," I said, more happy every minute.

"I promised pa we'd be neat, and careful too. He's pretty good to let us have a stove up here like this."

"If you ask me," I spoke feelingly, "I think you've got the next to the best father in the whole world."

"I think he *is* the best," Red laughed. "But we better shut the stove off now and head for school."

He closed the lower draft in the fuel door and turned the pipe damper.

"It's all right now," he told me, starting off.

"Mother's going to look up some frying pans for me this afternoon," I told him, when we were outside.

"Hot dog! And don't forget about the beans and potatoes, Jerry, when you come over tonight."

"Maybe I can bring some pie too," I partly promised. "For there was half a one left this noon."

"The more the better," he smacked.

"Horse Foot's coming too," I told him.

"Did you invite him?"

"Yes," I flushed, "I thought I should after that beautiful push I gave him this morning. That sure was cowardly of me. I did it before I thought. I hope Mother and Dad don't hear about it."

"And wouldn't he take less than ten dollars, Jerry?" Red asked earnestly.

I repeated what Horse Foot had told me about his need of ten dollars and the glasses.

"Well, he'll never get ten dollars from us,"

growled Red, "no matter how badly he needs it."

"I wonder who the glasses are for," I puzzled.

"Wouldn't he tell you?"

"He started to but the bell called him off. He said he'd tell to-night. He's bringing his goat over too."

"Well, do a little more coaxing for it, Jerry," Red advised eagerly. "You stand ace high with him, and there's no reason why he shouldn't let us use it."

"Let's find out first who the glasses are for," I suggested.

Red gave me a funny look.

"Boy, you *will* feel sheepish if you learn he's trying to raise money for glasses for some poor old man or old lady."

"I feel sheepish already," I told him shame-facedly. "So keep still about it."

As soon as school was out that night I got my stuff together and hurried over to Red's, the two of us later cooking the swellest supper that any pair of boys anywhere ever sat down to. The gravy was a little bit lumpy I'll admit, but as Red said, that wasn't anything to worry about—for what was a little flour more or less,

and that's what the lumps were—or that's what we thought they were till I bit into one that turned out to be a lead sinker. We were too busy with the beefsteak and other stuff to wonder how the sinker got there or what was delaying Horse Foot and the goat. We had looked for them early, but they still hadn't showed up when we were ready to eat, so just before six I grabbed my cap and ran over, finding Horse Foot sitting in his bedroom with a face a foot long, his folks evidently having all gone away.

"Aren't you coming over?" I asked, tumbling in on him.

"I c-c-can't," he told me. "Ma and pa have g-g-gone out in the country and I've g-g-got to stay with Piledriver."

I hadn't noticed till then that the goat was in the bed, with an ice bottle on his head and his whiskers fanning the covers, which had been pulled up tightly under his chin in regular hospital style.

"He ate a c-c-can of furniture glue," Horse Foot told me mournfully.

A goat in bed! Of all things! Still, it wasn't any worse than some of the other crazy things that had happened around there to my knowledge. The family never lacked for variety with Horse Foot around!

I circled the bed, the goat following me with his mournful eyes.

"What did you say he ate?" I asked, grinning.

"A c-c-can of furniture glue."

"But if he's full of glue," I joked, "you shouldn't put an ice pack on his head. Suppose some of the glue got in his brains and hardened from the ice. The wheels couldn't go round at all then. What you should have, instead of an ice pack, is a hot-water bottle to keep the glue soft so it'll work out through his skin."

At this point the goat decided for himself that he had had enough of the ice bottle and, shaking it off, started chewing it, Horse Foot jumping to save it.

Red almost laughed himself sick when I got back with an account of the sick goat and how I had left him chewing vigorously on one end of the ice bottle and Horse Foot pulling pop-eyed on the other. But we went ahead with our supper, enjoying every bite of it and eating everything down to the last scrap. Instead of putting all the food on the little table that Mrs. Meyers had given us, as was done at home, we just loaded up our plates at the stove, taking potatoes and gravy first, then meat and beans,

each getting the same number of dips, and finishing off with apple pie, cake and jello.

With the dishes all washed and stacked up on the table, we put in a couple of hours on a cupboard and then took a walk over by Horse Foot's house.

"I believe he's still up there all alone," I said, looking up at the bedroom light.

"Yes," Red peeked around the corner of the house toward the barn, "the car's gone."

So we went in, expecting Horse Foot to meet us at the head of the stairs, but instead he was sound asleep in bed with the goat.

We learned later that sickness in the family, on Mrs. Rail's side, had taken her hurriedly back into the country, following her all-day visit there Sunday. She came in in her fur coat and hat just as we were tiptoeing out.

"Where's Sammy?" she asked quickly, her eyes darting between us, our manner evidently having alarmed her.

"Upstairs in bed with the goat," I grinned.

"In bed with the goat?" she repeated with a gasp, her eyes popping. "Good heavens! Has he got that hairy thing in bed with him again? Well, that's going to stop right now and for good."

Up the stairs she flew, like a heavy freight

plane taking off under full power, grabbing a broom on the way, little Jane Rail flying after her, not wanting to miss anything, and probably hoping that her brother would get as much of the broom as the goat.

There was a dull thump from above as the broom came down across the bed, followed by a sudden wild bleat from the goat, then a clatter of hoofs, and then down the stairs he came three steps at a bound, Mrs. Rail still after him with her broom, screeching to us with each swat to open the door so that she could drive him out.

Talk about a bedlam! The goat evidently had run over Jane in making his escape down the stairs, and with her screeching at the top of her voice and Horse Foot screeching at his mother to stop beating his pet, you'd think that everybody in the place had suddenly gone mad. Hearing the commotion, Mr. Rail dashed in from putting the car away, just as the goat dashed out, the two coming together with a smack that could have been heard a block away. Down the front porch steps they rolled, their legs tangled, first one on top and then the other, with Mrs. Rail still swatting blindly with her broom, her hair now hanging down in her eyes, and inside Jane and Horse Foot still screeching as they tumbled down the stairs.

Goats as a rule are pretty gritty and able to take care of themselves, but this one, big as he was, was scared out of his wits. Getting away, he ran lickety-cut down the street with Horse Foot going into spasms over it, and Mr. Rail saying things, when he finally got to his feet, that wouldn't look very well in print.

Horse Foot started after the goat in his pajamas and bare feet but was roughly yanked back into the house, so Red and I took up the chase ourselves.

"Did you see a goat go by?" we asked a whiskered old man on the corner, the fleeting goat having disappeared from our sight there.

"Ghost?" the old man cupped his ear, bending forward. "No, I never saw a ghost myself, but my brother did one time. He was goin' through a graveyard an'—"

"Not a ghost—a *goat*," I cut in. "Did you see him go by?"

"Oh, a goat, heh? Well, I swan!—I thought you said ghost. Heh, heh, heh," he cackled sociably.

"Did you see him or didn't you?" I cut in again, for every second that we were losing was precious.

"No," he shook his head, walking on, "I

didn't see no goat. An' I thought you said ghost! Well, I swan!—heh, heh, heh!"

"Did I hear you boys asking about a goat?" Another man stopped.

"Yes," I spoke quickly, "did you see him go by?"

"He went down that way." The man pointed toward the river road.

"Thanks." We dashed off.

But it was a useless dash, the goat evidently having streaked it out of town for his old home somewhere down by the river.

CHAPTER IV

MYSTERY

MR. RAIL limped by to work the following morning, his hat tilted on one side of his head to keep it from chafing a bump that either the goat or his wife's wildly-directed broom had put there. Mrs. Rail herself waddled in later with the usual long tale of woe.

She had her house all open, she wheezed, to get the goat smell out, and all of Horse Foot's bedding had been put out for the laundry driver to pick up. There would be no more goat around *her* house, she declared flatly—and could we tell her where she could get a reliable carpenter to repair the spindles that the goat had knocked out when he made the bend in the stairs? She was still running on about broken stair spindles and goat smells when the first schoolbell rang, calling me off.

Horse Foot was waiting for me at the corner.

“L-l-look!” said he happily, pulling out a crumpled ten-dollar bill.

"Where did you get that?" I asked, staring at the money.

"From pa. He j-j-just gave it to me. It's for that b-b-boy."

"What boy? Who are you talking about?"

"D-d-didn't I tell you about that boy down by the r-r-river?"

"You told me yesterday you needed ten dollars to buy somebody glasses, and you were going to tell me last night who for, but you haven't told me yet."

"That's r-r-right. I forgot."

"What boy are you talking about?" I asked curiously.

"He's an orphan and he's hiding down by the r-r-river. I told him I'd sell his goat for him to b-b-buy him glasses, for he's half blind."

"An orphan?—hiding down by the river?" I stared.

"Yes, in an old b-b-boat."

"Say," I went at him, "what in sam hill are you talking about anyway?—an orphan hiding in a boat! How could anybody hide in a boat at this time of the year? There aren't any boats in the river."

"H-h-his sister paints pictures."

The fog thickened every minute!

"Is she hiding in a boat too?" I asked, dazed.

"S-s-sure thing. She's fourteen and he's t-t-ten."

"But what are they hiding for? Is somebody chasing them?—or did they rob a bank?"

"Annie d-d-didn't tell me that. She just said they were h-h-hiding and that Joe was half blind, so I brought their goat to town to sell it for them to h-h-help them. I took them out some f-f-flour and eggs too. Annie cried then."

"You mean," I stared harder than ever, my sympathies aroused now, "that they didn't have enough to eat?"

"Only some o-o-oatmeal that they found there."

"Found where?"

"In the b-b-boat. It's pulled up on the b-b-bank for the winter, and they're hiding in it."

That let in a faint ray of light, thank heaven!

"Oh! You mean a houseboat."

"Sure thing—with a s-s-stove in it," he further told me. "They b-b-burn driftwood."

"But who are they?" my curiosity deepened.

"Annie and Joe—I j-j-just told you."

"But Annie and Joe *who?*—and where did they come from?" I fired back.

"I don't k-k-know," he shrugged.

"Don't you know their last name?" I pressed.

"N-n-no," he shrugged again.

"How long have they been there?"

"I d-d-don't know that either."

"Well, what do you know?" I asked, exasperated.

"P-p-pickled pigs feet!" he went back to that brainless stuff.

I ignored it.

"Are you going out there again to-night?" I asked eagerly.

"S-s-sure thing."

"Is the ten dollars to pay for the goat?"

"N-n-no—for the glasses."

"But if you give the boy the ten dollars, don't you get the goat in exchange?" I pressed, with my own and Red's interests in mind.

Boy, we wanted that goat if we could possibly get it!

"P-p-pa says no."

"If he won't let you have the goat yourself, why did he give you the ten dollars?"

"To buy the b-b-boy's glasses."

"Well," I spoke earnestly, that part finally clear, "that was pretty swell of your pa all right—I never thought he'd do anything like

that, after what happened at your house last night."

"He wants me to h-h-help people in trouble."

"Yes, you should—we all should. And, listen!—I know how you can get another five dollars for that boy, if you want it."

"From you and R-r-red?" he asked eagerly, evidently reading my excited thoughts.

"Sure thing. If you can't keep the goat yourself, we'll gladly buy it for that—that is if we can find it again."

"Hot d-d-dog! But you mustn't tell," he enjoined.

"On Annie and Joe?—not if they're on the square," I promised, ready myself to help them in every way I could provided that they deserved it. But to have two parentless children show up that way, with only a goat, was out of the ordinary to say the least. If they expected further outside help it seemed to me that they should be willing to tell a little bit more about themselves and the danger from which they were hiding.

"How did you ever happen to bump into them in the first place?" I asked Horse Foot.

It was his further hastened story then (for the last bell was ringing) that he had spied the goat while hunting rabbits on the river bank

with a neighbor's dog. There had been a lively fight between the dog and the goat, the orphans rushing from their hiding place to protect their pet. Wanting to join our lodge, and feeling that if he got a goat he probably could, Horse Foot had offered to buy the orphans' goat, thus gaining their confidence and learning their circumstances as given.

"Annie t-t-told me Joe's glasses would cost t-t-ten dollars, and that's why yesterday I asked you t-t-ten dollars for the goat, Jerry. It wasn't to be p-p-piggy."

And I had pushed him down!

"Here's a gumdrop," I offered quickly, as we separated in the hall, the last ones in. "And don't forget!—I'm going with you to-night."

Red went too, the three of us riding to the river and down the bank on our bikes. But the houseboat cabin was cold and deserted. There was no sign of the goat either. The three, after hiding there so mysteriously, had either sought another hiding place considered safer, or the unknown danger that they had feared had caught up with them since the goat's return, taking them off.

"It looks as though we're doomed not to have a lodge goat," I told Red disappointedly, as we walked around the silent flat-bottomed boat, the

property probably of some summer fisherman or clammer who had left it there for the winter, hoping for its safety.

"Yes," growled Red, "I wish we had gotten here sooner—before the goat got away."

I peeped in the cabin window.

"I don't suppose it's any of our business where the boy and girl went to," I said, "or what they were hiding from, but to satisfy my own curiosity I would like to know who they were and what brought them here. It's unusual for two orphaned children to show up that way."

"Yes, I'm curious about them myself," Red peeped beside me into the small cabin.

"The window's unlocked, if we wanted to go in and look around," I told him.

"It wouldn't be any worse for us to go in than for them. But what do you expect to find in there, Jerry?"

"They could have left a letter behind," my detective instincts prompted.

"All right," Red came to a quick decision, sliding the window open. "You go in first and I'll follow."

Horse Foot wedged through too, though it was a tight squeeze for him.

"I'm w-w-worried about Annie," he told me, long-faced.

"Worried?—why?" I asked him, as I looked around sharply.

"I'm afraid s-s-something's happened to her."

"What's the matter?" laughed Red. "Are you in love with her?"

"She was a n-n-nice girl."

The only thing we found that the girl and her brother could possibly have left there was a small hand painting that had dropped down behind the bunk—a painting in colors of a four-story stone house of odd design set in a grove of pine trees.

"I b-b-bet Annie painted that herself," Horse Foot told us, as we gathered around the picture.

He had said something like that before.

"How do you know she could paint pictures?" I asked him.

"She s-s-showed me some she painted."

"Pictures of what?"

"T-t-trees and houses."

I gave the painting another probing look.

"It seems to me I've seen that house some place," I spoke thoughtfully. "It sure looks familiar to me."

"It's o-o-over there." Horse Foot pointed to a peeping rooftop about a quarter of a mile farther up the river.

"Sure thing," Red jumped in, "it's that old mineral-spring house. You know the place, Jerry—with the big wooden arch in front with the name on it—Excelsior Springs, or something like that. I've heard my grandfather tell how sick people used to go there for treatment till the mineral spring dried up years ago."

"But why should Annie paint that particular house?" I further studied the painting, not wanting to lightly pass it over if it could possibly serve as a clue.

"It's the nearest one," Red spoke practically.

"Did she say anything to you about the house?" I asked Horse Foot.

"N-n-no," he shook his head.

"I was just wondering," I studied, "if she hadn't some particular interest in the house, to paint it so carefully. I don't think I'd paint a house that way if I wasn't specially interested in it."

"S-s-she painted everything she saw, Joe told me."

"Yes," put in Red, "I don't see anything queer about her painting the house, Jerry. She

wanted to paint a house, so she picked out the nearest one."

"But she painted *this* from the other side—I remember the house now and how it looks on the east side. That means she had to go over there to do the painting. Or *did* she paint it?" I added quickly, my eye having detected a faint date in the painting's lower right-hand corner. "Look at that, Red! According to that date the painting is twenty-two years old."

Red turned puzzled to Horse Foot.

"Was this painting among those she showed you?"

"I d-d-don't think so."

Red's puzzled eyes came back to mine.

"Maybe you're right, Jerry," he spoke slowly. "Maybe she did have a particular interest in that house over there—for she and her brother brought a painting of it here evidently made years ago. It was probably the house, or something they knew about it, that brought them here. That's sensible to believe. It may be that the danger they feared was there too."

We had no proof of course that the painting had been brought there by the two mysterious orphans. It could have been there when they came. The mere fact that the girl herself painted pictures didn't prove that this one was

theirs. But something *had* brought them to the out-of-the-way spot, and what more likely than a secret interest in the old stone house, so faithfully reproduced in the painting? Besides, the recovered painting hadn't the crumpled, dusty appearance that you'd naturally expect if it had been long behind the bunk, which further added to our belief that it was the orphans' forgotten property and not the boat-owner's.

Who had painted the picture in the first place? Where had the orphans come from with it and *why* had they come here with it? Of course, as I had told Red, it was none of our business, or where the orphans and the goat had disappeared to either. But somehow I felt we should make it our business. Boys and girls should help each other, and here it seemed to me was a case where an unfortunate girl and boy—the latter half blind according to report—needed help badly.

The little food that Horse Foot had taken them wouldn't last long, so even if they were safe in some other hiding place they very probably were hungry and cold—it wouldn't be so easy for them to find another place with a stove in it like this. If we found them we could help them, not only with the necessary food and heat, but with such protection as loyal Juvenile Jupi-

ter Detectives could give them. We might even be able to drive off the danger threatening them, thus enabling them to come out from under cover and live their lives without fear. Or if this danger had caught up with them, as was possible, we could rescue them.

"Annie'll think I l-l-lied to her," Horse Foot again spoke of the girl, more long-faced than ever.

"Lied about what?" I asked him.

"The g-g-goat."

I saw what he meant. He had promised to sell the goat for the needy orphans, but instead of the promised ten dollars they had gotten the goat itself back, which could have appeared to them as having been turned loose to come back. Still, as I told Horse Foot, after all he had done to help them they should have more confidence in him than that, and if safe, as we hoped, might even try to contact him again about the goat's sale—for certainly they couldn't have gone far.

"If you do hear from them again," I told him strictly, "don't keep it to yourself as before, but let us know right away. Do you get that?"

"S-s-sure thing, I'll tell you, Jerry," he promised faithfully, his face showing how hope-

ful he was that he soon would have something to report.

"Where did they get the goat in the first place, Horse Foot?" Red next asked. "Did they tell you, or how they happened to bring it here?"

"N-n-no," Horse Foot shook his head.

"You wouldn't expect kids hiding that way to have a goat," proceeded Red thoughtfully. "Certainly if I went into hiding myself I wouldn't take a goat with me."

"They probably had the goat before they had to hide," I gave my view on that.

"Can you think of anything more that you haven't told us yet that will help us find them?" Red further asked Horse Foot.

"N-n-no," he shook his head again.

There was nothing more that we could do there, so pocketing the painting I started to crawl out, but stopped petrified, halfway through the window, when a peculiar gruff rasping voice suddenly let out at us.

"Come, come, you scamps! Out of there, and lively, before I blow your brains out."

There was nobody directly outside that I could see. But figuring I was safer out than in (for we *were* trespassing) I quickly crawled out, the others, white-faced, tumbling after me.

“Who was it?” chattered Red, as we looked around, keeping together.

There was no one there any place!

“Suffering cats!” I squawked. “It must have been a ghost.”

“Haw, haw, haw!” came the jeering guffaw from a near-by tree, as though whoever had ordered us out was now highly amused by our bewilderment.

“It’s a parrot!” cried Red, craning. “See! There it goes, toward the stone house!”

“Haw, haw, haw!” further jeered the flying parrot, its rasping voice finally dying away, the three of us watching petrified until it had completely disappeared from sight.

CHAPTER V

JUMBLED THEORIES

A FELLOW always feels shaky when he pokes around a place like that. All the time we were in there I kept wondering uneasily what we'd do if someone with rights there caught us there, so I wasn't as much surprised when we got that gruff order to get out as I was scared.

Then to have that eerie parrot fly off jeering toward the very place the vanished orphans could have been taken to forcibly! Small wonder that for a minute or two we were petrified with fright. It would almost seem that the crafty bird had been spying on us with human intelligence and now was flying back to report to some sinister source what it had seen and overheard.

And yet, my good sense told me, a parrot wouldn't know enough to do that. Smartness in parrots was just their ability to remember sounds and repeat them. It was foolish to think that the parrot had been spying on us. It had just happened along, and that talk of its was its

usual talk under all circumstances. The only truly queer thing about it was that it should have been flying around loose, and in such chilly weather.

Later we guardedly circled the old stone house, crawling from bush to bush to keep from being seen from within, our bikes hidden back by the houseboat. We thought maybe we'd see the goat outside, or possibly a small hand waving for help from a barred window. There were plenty of small-paned windows to check up on, but not one of them was barred, nor was there the least sign of life in any of them or anywhere about.

A showy latticed pavilion had been built over the mineral spring that had so unaccommodatingly dried up. The pavilion showed in the little painting that we had picked up, also the big wooden arch that Red had mentioned. But since we had last been there both the pavilion and arch had disappeared, the wispy white wood smoke from the building's huge stone chimney suggesting that the present occupants had found it necessary to tear down the pavilion and arch for fuel. But who were the present occupants, and if our theory of the place was correct what was their object in luring the orphan children here and imprisoning them?

It was in all a queer, lonely place reached in back by the brooding river and in front by a winding, treacherous dirt road, often flooded in the spring and fall and connecting with the main road at the river bridge just south of town. The more I saw of the place the more I was struck by its evident shrouding mystery, and yet I was forced to confess, after a complete circuit of it, that I hadn't seen a single tangible thing about it to justify our suspicions of it.

"We can't do any more around here tonight," I told the fellows practically, as early darkness came on, "so let's get our bikes and get out of here while we can still see to ride."

"Yes," shivered Red, "I don't think I'd care to hang around here very long in the dark."

"W-w-why not?" piped up Horse Foot, unconcerned himself.

"Oh, don't get heroic!" Red growled at him. "If anything grabbed you in the dark you'd squawk just as loud as anybody else."

"But I w-w-want to rescue Annie," Horse Foot held back.

"Well, you can stay and rescue her if you want to," Red said indifferently, starting off. "If you should get hyphenated from your air supply we'll see that you get a nice funeral. You're coming, aren't you, Jerry?"

"Sure thing, and you come along too, Horse Foot," I gave him his orders.

He didn't like it but he did it.

"P-p-poor Annie!" he mumbled sympathetically, with a final longing look back.

Red nudged me, grinning.

"We may end up with a wedding, Jerry."

"If we had the slightest proof that the girl was there," I told him earnestly, with my mind on the mystery, "I'd get the police out just as soon as we got home. But without some definite proof we'd just get laughed at. So the thing to do first, I think, is to find out who's living there and figure out, if we can, *why* they should want to imprison two harmless children. If we get that part all right, and still feel the children are there, we'll watch the place from the bushes till we see some definite signs of them. There's the goat for instance. If he's there we're bound to see him in time or his tracks, or if he has been killed we can easily find his body or his grave. We might see a boy's shirt on the line or a girl's dress. Anything like that will be clue enough to justify us in going to the police. But we can't go empty-handed as now."

"No," Red agreed, "we can't go to the police without some proof. And the way to get the proof, as you say, is to spy around there till

something pops up. That'll be exciting too."

The house was dark when I got home, Dad and Mother having gone over to the county seat on sudden urgent business. But there was plenty of food handy, so I got along all right, later stacking my dishes neatly in the sink, as Mother had asked me to do in her note, and hurrying over to the lodge room where I found Red arguing with his Aunt Pansy, who lives there, over a framed painting that he evidently had just hung up on the wall.

Mrs. Meyers has her hands full keeping peace between her widowed sister, Mrs. Pansy Biggle, and Red. If anything of Aunt Pansy's comes up missing Red gets the blame, and usually rightly, for he dearly loves to poke into her stored household goods in the attic or slip into the box of chocolates that she always keeps beside her bed—though you'd naturally think, from her size, that she'd leave such things alone. She runs a beauty parlor down town, and to be a good advertisement for it paints and powders up like a doll. I think she and Mrs. Meyers are twins, but I like Mrs. Meyers the best. She's like Mother—with an interest in boys' things. Aunt Pansy's only interest, outside of her business, is in dressing up and going to bridge parties.

"No, you can't have it," she flatly refused Red the painting as I came in, trying with her puffy arms to push him aside to get it. "If you don't get out of my way, so I can get it, I'm going to call your father."

"Please, Aunt Pansy!" Red begged his prettiest. "It was just laying around in the attic—and we won't hurt it any up here. We want our lodge room to look nice. Please let me keep it, Aunt Pansy."

"It's an old keepsake and I'm not going to have it kicked around and ruined by a lot of silly boys."

"It won't get kicked around hanging on the wall," Red argued. "We couldn't kick that high if we wanted to. And I wanted it because it's such a good picture of you, Aunt Pansy."

"Good picture of *me*?" his aunt snorted, stiffening. "Heavens, that isn't a picture of me."

"Isn't it?" Red asked surprised, his mouth opening. "It looks just like you."

"Looks like me *nothing*! It's a picture of a circus fat lady that Alameda Thorburton painted for me one time after we'd been to the circus together."

"Oh!" said Red limply.

"Let me have it," his aunt reached for it again, still snappy.

"But I want it anyway, Aunt Pansy," he began coaxing again. "Please."

"I said *no* and I mean *no*. Furthermore I want you to keep out of my things in the attic. Every day you drag something down you have no right to."

Failing to budge her, Red got up on a box scowling and yanked the painting down.

"Be careful!" his aunt cautioned, reaching for it anxiously.

"Take your old painting," he shoved it at her. "But don't you ever ask me to wash your beauty-parlor windows again or carry out any ashes down there."

She went off stiffly with the painting under her arm.

"As long as you've got to live in the same house with her," I advised Red sensibly, "why don't you leave her things alone? You do poke around in them a whole lot more than you have any right to."

"Just wait!" he waggled fiercely, trying to be as ugly about it as he could. "She'll want me to do something for her some day—and will she get left!"

Following a murmur of voices below, Mrs. Meyers came in wheezing, herself pretty big.

"My!" she complimented, looking around in-

terested. "How pleasant you boys have it up here! I never dreamed you could transform the old haymow like this. What an odd stove too!"

"Hadn't you seen it before?" I asked proudly, as Red still went around kicking things.

"No—nor your wallboard either."

"Do you think it looks like the inside of a stone castle?" I asked her eagerly about our painting.

"Well . . . somewhat," she took her time to reply, as she further looked around.

"That's what we tried to make it look like," I told her. "In the initiation in our lodge Red and I are supposed to live in an old stone castle like the knights lived in years ago. I'm the Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder and he's the Brother Keeper of the Keys."

"Well, you certainly have it pleasant up here," she further complimented. "But you mustn't get too rough with your initiation, or let the fire burn up too much. And, Donald," she turned on him stiffly, "for goodness' sake get that scowl off your face, or I'll take you in the house and scrub it off. I know what you're scowling about, your aunt just told me, and you're going to get yourself into trouble if you don't leave her things alone as you've been

told. That picture you took was a keepsake of hers, painted for her by an old girlhood friend. I know how she felt about it. If you wanted pictures up here, why didn't you come to me?—I have dozens of them poked away in the attic. You can even have that big copy of Washington crossing the Delaware."

"Yes, and a mouse chewed Washington's nose out! No thanks!"

"I can put a new nose on for you."

"I wouldn't want it if you put two new noses on it. I wanted *that* picture."

The stairs creaked as Red's aunt came back up.

"I've changed my mind about the painting," she told Red, handing it to him. "If you need it as badly as you let on, you can have it, though I hope you won't misuse it."

Red's freckled face lit up like a lamp.

"Oh, Aunt Pansy!" he threw his arms around her, hugging her by installments. "You're swell."

So after all the fuss the painting went back up on the wall!

"Poor Alameda!" sighed Aunt Pansy, as she stood looking at the painting. "I often wonder what became of her."

"Didn't you ever hear anything at all from

her after her unfortunate elopement?" Mrs. Meyers asked, herself grave now as her thoughts took her back.

"No—I haven't had a line from her from that day to this, dear as we were to each other, but I'm hoping she's happier where she is than when she was at home with that nitwit brother of hers and that hateful older sister."

"I heard some terrible things about William's funeral last week," Mrs. Meyers spoke further of the people, with a shocked air.

"Yes, they had to buy him a new suit to bury him in—I heard it myself. The neighbors had to make Florence a dress too—the both of them hadn't *anything*. They say Florence was in rags when they found her, she's so miserly. Out of that whole huge house all she and her brother used was a couple of rooms—and separated rooms too. They couldn't agree well enough to live together. William had his room on one side of the house and she had hers on the other—and both so dirty the neighbors were shocked. Alameda was the only one in the family who was halfway human—and because she was that way and liked pretty things, they did everything they could to spite her—Florence particularly, I mean. William, of course, was just putty in Florence's hands. But I'll have to be

going as I have a hair-wash at seven-thirty.”

Red hugged his aunt to the door.

“Well, thanks again, Aunt Pansy,” he honied to her. “I promise you the painting won’t be misused either.”

I hurriedly got him aside when he got back.

“Ask your ma some more about those people,” I prompted excitedly.

“Why?” he asked.

“Didn’t you hear what your aunt just said? —about a big house? I think she and your mother were talking about that big house down by the river.”

I was right too, Mrs. Meyers getting as excited as us as she told us what she knew about the unusual place and its occupants. With that other painting of the house and this one, known to have come from there, it wasn’t hard to figure out who the orphans were or a motive for their imprisonment there.

To start with, the place had been built by a foreign mineral-spring specialist, Dr. Adolf Thorburton, who had come to America with his three children, William, Florence and Alameda, to set up a curative natural-water resort like some of the big-paying spas that he knew of in Europe. Finding finally the spring by the river he had spent his whole fortune developing it

and had made another small fortune from it before it had suddenly and unaccountably dried up. More money had been spent frantically to renew the needed health-giving flow, but unsuccessfully, and the doctor finally gave up in despair. His mind breaking down from worry, he died before his time and his property went to his two oldest children.

The more we talked about it the more excited we got, for it was as plain as day to us that the two orphans were the children of the youngest Thorburton girl, Alameda the artist, whose home life had been made so unhappy for her that she had rushed into an unfortunate marriage, her disinheritance following. This had all been schemed out by the older sister, who influenced her failing father unfairly, and later kept her thin-witted brother under her thumb till at his recent death she got his share of the property too, thus giving her complete possession.

She never had lost faith that some day the mineral spring would start bubbling again, bringing in a new flow of gold for her to hide away with her other hoardings. Miser that she was she wanted it all and had schemed to get it all. It was her parrot that we had seen, for it was known that she had one, and it was of her

that the orphans were so deathly afraid. They had told Horse Foot that there was a "great danger" near them. Homeless and destitute they had come here hoping desperately that things wouldn't be as unfavorable as their mother had pictured, and yet, that near, they were afraid to actually show themselves. Their miserly aunt probably hadn't known of their existence till they finally got up nerve to approach her for help, and then fearful that they might get some of the property away from her, even though their mother had been legally disinherited, she had locked them up in one of the rooms of her great house, probably to feed on crusts till they were done for.

It was a terrible thing to think of a woman, and yet everything led to that view. Everything fitted together perfectly. But before we could get to the police with our story, Horse Foot came into the lodge room with a post-card received late that afternoon that sent our theories crashing into fragments.

The card was from Annie.

"Dear Sammy," it read, "by the time you get this Joe and I will be many miles from Tutter with a new friend who arrived just in time to hurriedly save us from a danger that was very close to us. We are all right now, with

everything we need, so please do not wonder or worry about us, and please do not tell anybody anything about us, especially the police, as that might harm us. We will always feel grateful for your help and are hoping that some day we will be able to repay you. Your happy friend now, Annie."

CHAPTER VI

INITIATION PLANS

HORSE FOOT came tearing in the following morning before I was up.

“H-h-hey! Come on and g-g-get up,” he cried, jumping excitedly on the bed. “P-p-piledriver’s back.”

“Huh?” I grunted, half asleep. “Who’s back?”

“P-p-piledriver. He came b-b-back last night.”

Piledriver! That was the goat! Oh, boy! I popped out of bed, grabbing my clothes.

“Where is he?” I asked excitedly.

“D-d-down there,” Horse Foot pointed through a window on the side where he lived.

I ran over. Sure enough, there was the goat tied below to a tree.

“Did Annie bring him back?” I asked.

“I t-t-think he came back himself.”

“Was he loose when you found him?”

“Yes.”

"Evidently Annie couldn't take him with her and turned him loose, huh?"

"Maybe he never w-w-went back to her."

"We thought he did."

"She d-d-didn't say anything about him in her card."

"That's right too! If she had been intending to turn him loose she would have mentioned him all right."

"I t-t-think she thought I still h-h-had him."

"But where has he been since Monday night?"

"H-h-hiding some place."

"Well, we've got him back anyway," I spoke gleefully. "That's the main point."

"M-m-ma's mad."

"Because he came back?" I laughed, recalling the exciting circumstances of his flight.

"Yes. So you b-b-better keep him, Jerry."

"We'll take him over to Red's barn," I planned quickly. "That's the best place for him. Will little old Red ever be tickled pink. A goat at last! Oh, boy! We can start having initiations right away now."

"H-h-how about the stone house? Are we g-g-going to detect there some more?"

"That's out now," I waved it out lightly with my hand. "There's nothing out there to interest

us now—though before you brought that post-card over we sure thought we had a hot detective case out there. Everything seemed to fit together perfectly when we talked it over with Mrs. Meyers, but everything went hay-wire when you came along with that post-card. I felt kind of limpsy about it too when I got home last night and into bed. I hated to think that we could have been so completely misled. I thought I was a better detective than that myself. But everything's lovely now—with the goat back. Oh, boy!"

"I t-t-think *I* will," said Horse Foot.

"You will what?"

"D-d-detect some more out there."

"The orphans aren't there, you egg! That card that you got from Annie proves it."

"I need p-p-practice anyway," he persisted.

"You better keep away from there," I grinned. "The old woman who lives there is an old witch, and if she catches you hanging around there you may lose your ears."

"W-w-what?" he strutted around, with unbounded confidence in himself. "Her catch H-h-horse Foot the detective? Phooey!"

"Well, don't you go out there and make a monkey of yourself," I told him, as I further jumped into my clothes.

"Is the old w-w-woman out there Annie's aunt?" he asked thoughtfully.

"That's what we think—and that Annie's and Joe's original intention in coming here was to ask for a home there."

"I'm g-g-glad the old woman didn't get them."

"So am I."

"Is A-a-annie's aunt rich?" he asked next.

"Mrs. Meyers thinks so. The story is that there's savings hidden all over the house in cracks and behind pictures. The old woman living there is a miser, and so was the man who just died there. The two wouldn't even buy soap to keep clean, and the day of the funeral the neighbors had to make the parrot woman a dress so she could go decently to her brother's funeral."

"W-w-who got the dress?" Horse Foot asked quickly.

"The parrot woman—that's what the neighbors call Annie's aunt."

"Oh! And will Annie g-g-get her aunt's money some day?"

"She may, but she has no legal right to anything out there now, for her mother was disinherited."

"What's that?"

"She married some man her father didn't approve of, so when he died he willed all he had to his two other children."

"I'm k-k-keeping Annie's post-card," he told me.

"You fell hard for Annie, didn't you?" I laughed.

"She was a n-n-nice girl," he waggled.

"Didn't you like Joe too?"

"Oh, s-s-sure thing. But I liked Annie the b-b-best."

"Well, you beat it now," I told him, "while I brush my teeth and eat breakfast. I'll see you outside."

There wasn't much actual studying that day for Red and me. Instead of state boundaries and capital cities our minds were on the swell initiation that we were going to have that night —the first initiation of our new Up-the-Ladder lodge!

Never were boys happier. First we had worked out what we thought was a clever idea for our lodge, then we had made ourselves a nifty lodge room with heat and light, and now, most wonderful of all, the goat that we needed so badly had literally fallen into our lap, as the saying is, without it costing us a penny.

The teacher asked me once, smiling herself,

why I looked so happy. But I didn't tell her the truth. Our lodge was a secret and I wasn't going to tell her about it in front of the other pupils and probably have some boy come snooping around during the coming initiation to later blab what he had heard inside. It's easy enough for anyone to hear what goes on in a barn.

As soon as school was out for the day Red and I rushed back to his barn to give the goat some final lodge training and get the candidate's ladder ready. It was our intention to take Scoop in first, but at six o'clock he phoned that his grandmother was very ill. We had better let him go till some other time, he told us in a troubled voice. So it was decided at the last moment to initiate Horse Foot instead.

We found him in his room cutting up an old fur piece of his mother's.

"I'm m-m-making myself some false whiskers," he told us, still determined I guess to practice detecting around the stone house, though what he expected to get out of that was more than I could see, except possibly a sharp order from the irritated owner to get out of her yard and stay out.

"Instead of false whiskers you better start making yourself a pad for the seat of your pants," I told him laughingly.

"A p-p-pad?" he looked at me quickly.
"What for?"

"To-night," I told him importantly, "you're going to have the great honor of being the first boy in the whole world to be initiated into our Up-the-Ladder lodge. You say yourself the goat is a good hunter, so you better prepare yourself, boy!"

"Yes," put in Red, "but don't put too much in the seat of your pants, for all we allow is one pillow."

Horse Foot got a pillow from the bed and started stuffing it into the back of his pants right away.

"How's t-t-that?" he asked, strutting around.

I thought I'd bust, for he stuck out behind like a lopsided kangaroo.

"You'll do," I told him.

"But listen," Red spoke earnestly, "this lodge of ours is a serious affair—we don't intend to take any boy into it who can't be trusted to keep our secrets and pay his dues. Are you willing to keep our secrets and pay your dues?"

"S-s-sure thing," Horse Foot promised eagerly.

"All right then," said Red, "you come over at eight o'clock, like you are now, and bring

some salve and ten cents for your first week's dues."

"W-w-what's the salve for?" Horse Foot wanted to know.

"Oh, that?" said Red, with a light air. "Oh, that's to rub on you after Piledriver gets through tossing you around. Well, we'll see you later, victim—good-by."

Now as I go on with my story I'm going to put down the initiation just as you'd expect to find the initiation of any secret lodge in its instruction books. Such books are called lodge rituals, and I'm going to put down my story here in the form of a ritual. Why? Well, you'll get all the story that way, and in a new way—I think you'll like the novelty of it. But my main object is to enable you, if you wish, to get up a lodge just like ours, with your own secret signs and passwords. I know how boys and girls are, and after reading this story a lot of boys and girls will say to themselves: "Gee, I wish I could get up a lodge like that!"

Well, you can—I'm going to put it all down in my story, so you can do it exactly as we did it, starting with two officers as we did, or with eight, the full number required. You may not have a barn lodge room like ours, and a real goat, but any persevering boy or girl will find

a suitable lodge room somewhere around the house, and of course a real goat isn't necessary. A carpenter's trestle on roller skates, with antlers and whiskers, would make a swell goat—and funny too. You can readily see the fun you'd have making your chums ride a "goat" like that! Anyway I have suggested it—the rest is up to you.

You already know about our lodge room and how we had painted the wallboard to look like a castle wall. As the Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder (you'll hear about the ladder later) I had a station (made out of an orange crate) at the north end of the lodge room where I sat with a gavel (a broken croquet mallet) when the lodge opened. Red, as the Brother Keeper of the Keys, was seated at a similar station with a gavel (another broken croquet mallet) at the south end of the lodge room. These were to be our regular later offices, and the other offices that we took that memorable night were to be taken by other members of the order as fast as we initiated them. It was a lot of fun the way we did it that night, changing our voice for the different parts and acting the parts as naturally as we could, sometimes reading the lines from our typewritten rituals and sometimes speaking the lines from memory.

The candidate of course was blindfolded throughout the initiation so he didn't know who was speaking half the time, especially when we changed our voice, or whether we were reading or reciting from memory.

Here is a complete list of our officers:

Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder (my regular office).

Brother Keeper of the Keys (Red's regular office).

Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat (Red took this part that night).

Brother Lookout (I took this part that night).

First Robber (I took this part).

Second Robber (Red took this part).

Black Imp (Red took this part).

Knight of the Gold Star (I took this part).

Mrs. Meyers had given us some old gold-fringed purple velvet drapes which made swell impressive lodge robes for us when worked over. In addition to my velvet fringed robe I wore a red-and-white turban and carried a wooden scimitar at my side. Red had a bunch of huge tin keys hanging from his belt, as he was supposed to have charge of all the castle doors. At the last moment he and I rigged up a little velvet petticoat for Piledriver, further tying a

little brass bell to each of his horns. He sure looked nifty, let me tell you, and seemingly just as ready for the coming fun as we were. But don't get the mistaken idea here that we were going to let the goat bunt Horse Foot around—that talk about the salve and padding the seat of his pants was just done to scare him.

Well, at eight o'clock we were all ready, with the goat tied in the little anteroom that we had provided at the head of the stairs. There was a door between the anteroom and the lodge room, or as we called it in our initiation the "castle court." Horse Foot had been told to wait at the foot of the stairs till we called him up.

In the next chapter LADD means me, Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder; KEYS means Red, Brother Keeper of the Keys; GOAT, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat; LOOK, Brother Lookout; 1 RB, First Robber; 2 RB, Second Robber; IMP, Black Imp; STAR, Knight of the Gold Star and CAND, the Candidate himself.

Have you got that all fixed in your mind? All right then, let's go!

CHAPTER VII

UP-THE-LADDER

LADD: (*at station—seated—raps three times with gavel*) “Let there be order in our Castle Court, the Brother Knights in attendance seating themselves and the officers taking their respective stations preliminary to the opening of our lodge.”

(*Brother Knights seat themselves, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat retires to anteroom with goat, Brother Keeper of the Keys closes and locks door, then seating himself at his station, Brother Lookout seats himself just inside door*)

LADD: (*raps twice with gavel*) “Brother Keeper of the Keys.”

KEYS: (*arises*) “Yes, Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder?”

LADD: “I am about to open our lodge. Will you therefore instruct our Brother Lookout to station himself accordingly that none uninitiated here may approach without our knowledge

and warning, and order him in turn to pass this information along to our Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat without our castle door, that he may properly await there.”

KEYS: (*raps twice with gavel*) “Brother Lookout.”

LOOK: (*arises*) “Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?”

KEYS: “We are about to open our lodge and it is the order of our Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder that you station yourself in your Lookout Tower, as always during our secret sessions, to warn us of approaching wayfarers uninitiated into our secret order, that we may be warned accordingly.”

(*Brother Lookout climbs to his station in lookout tower at door*)

LOOK: “Brother Keeper of the Keys, the castle is guarded as ordered.”

KEYS: “Can you see our Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat without our castle gate?”

LOOK: “I can.”

KEYS: “Then you will call down to him that we are about to open our lodge and that he will accordingly await in his usual station, this being the further order of our leader.”

LOOK: (*calls*) “Hail, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat.”

GOAT: (*calls*) "What hails you, Brother Look-out?"

LOOK: "It is the order of our Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder, as conveyed to me through our Brother Keeper of the Keys, that our lodge is about to be opened, and that you are to await accordingly in your proper station."

GOAT: "The order has been obeyed."

LOOK: "'Tis well . . . Brother Keeper of the Keys."

KEYS: "Yes, Brother Lookout?"

LOOK: "The order has been obeyed."

KEYS: "'Tis well . . . Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder."

LADD: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?"

KEYS: "It is my pleasure to report that your order has been obeyed."

LADD: "'Tis well. You will now pass among the assembled Brother Knights to receive the prescribed grip and secret words in the usual way, that we may know that all present are worthy of attendance."

(*Brother Keeper of the Keys passes from one Brother Knight to another receiving from each, in a whisper, the proper secret words, also the secret grip*)

KEYS: (*at station—standing*) "Most High

and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder."

LADD: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?"

KEYS: "Your order has been obeyed, all present proving worthy of attendance."

LADD: (*raps six times with gavel*) "Then I declare this lodge duly opened for the transaction of whatever suitable business may come before it. You will so inform our Brothers."

KEYS: (*raps six times with gavel—Brother Knights arising*) "Our Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder has instructed me to inform you that our lodge is now duly opened for the transaction of whatever suitable business may come before it."

(*leader raps once with gavel, Brother Knights and officers then seating themselves, the transaction of regular business following*)

LOOK: "Brother Keeper of the Keys."

KEYS: (*arises*) "Yes, Brother Lookout?"

LOOK: "There approaches a lone wayfarer."

KEYS: "You will further keep informed on his movements while I report to our leader . . . Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder."

LADD: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?"

KEYS: "It is the report of our Brother Lookout that a lone wayfarer approaches."

LADD: "You will so inform our Brother

Keeper of the Sacred Goat, that he may question the wayfarer in the usual way, and if it be the purpose of the wayfarer to penetrate our domain in quest of the secrets of the Mystic Ladder to further instruct and prepare him."

(*Brother Keeper of the Keys goes to door and gives five raps*)

(*Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat without gives five responding raps*)

(*Brother Keeper of the Keys pretends to unlock the door with one of his huge tin keys—door is opened with rattle of chain*)

KEYS: "Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat."

GOAT: (*standing at attention*) "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?"

KEYS: "Our leader, having been informed through our Brother Lookout of the approach of a lone wayfarer, has ordered that you question the wayfarer in the regular way. Should it be his desire to penetrate our domain, to learn our secrets in due form, you will properly instruct and inform him, blindfold him, and mount him on the Sacred Goat."

(*Brother Keeper of the Keys closes door, with rattle of chain, pretends to lock door, then returns to his station*)

GOAT: (*in anteroom—to candidate at foot of stairs*) "Who comes there?"

CAND: (*reading part*) "A lone wayfarer seeking admittance into your illustrious order."

GOAT: "You will ascend the stairs, suffer yourself to be blindfolded, and await, mounted on the Sacred Goat, till your wish has been conveyed to our leader."

(*candidate is prepared for initiation*)

(*Brother Keeper of the Goat raps in code on door*)

KEYS: (*arises at his station*) "Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder."

LADD: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?"

KEYS: "There is an alarm at our castle door."

LADD: "You will attend the alarm and report its cause to me."

(*Brother Keeper of the Keys goes to door, unlocks it, then opens it with usual rattle of chain*)

KEYS: "Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat."

GOAT: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?"

KEYS: "Our leader has ordered me to learn the cause of the alarm at our castle door."

GOAT: "The lone wayfarer whose approach our Brother Lookout reported wishes to penetrate our domain and learn the secrets of the Mystic Ladder."

KEYS: "Is he duly qualified in character and honor, with understanding and will power to do the right?"

GOAT: "He is."

KEYS: "Has he the necessary courage and fortitude to proceed, knowing that in our domain he will encounter grave dangers?"

GOAT: "He has."

KEYS: "Do you vouch for him?"

GOAT: "I do."

KEYS: "Has he been properly blindfolded and mounted on the Sacred Goat?"

GOAT: "He has."

KEYS: "You will await here with the mounted candidate till I report his wishes and qualifications to our leader."

(*Brother Keeper of the Keys closes and locks door in usual way, returning to his station*)

KEYS: (*standing*) "Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder."

LADD: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?"

KEYS: "The lone wayfarer whose approach our Brother Lookout reported, desirous of learning the secrets of our order, awaits without our castle door, blindfolded and mounted on the Sacred Goat."

LADD: "Is he duly qualified in character and honor, with understanding and will power to do the right?"

KEYS: "He is."

LADD: "Has our Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat vouched for him?"

KEYS: "He has."

LADD: "Do you further vouch for him?"

KEYS: "I do."

LADD: "Has he the necessary courage and fortitude to proceed, knowing that in our domain he will encounter grave dangers?"

KEYS: "He has."

LADD: "Then it is my order that he be finally instructed and admitted in due form—you will so report to our Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat. Then await at the castle door for his further signal."

(*Brother Keeper of the Keys goes to door, unlocks and opens it*)

KEYS: "Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat."

GOAT: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?"

KEYS: "It is the order of our leader that the candidate be finally instructed and then admitted in due form."

(*Brother Keeper of the Keys closes and locks door, standing at attention beside it*)

GOAT: (*to candidate*) "You are now at the door of the castle of the Mystic Ladder. Within are gathered trusted Brother Knights whose sworn duty it is to gallantly protect our Mystic Ladder from unworthy invasion. You have expressed the wish that you too may become one of these Brother Knights, enjoying the privi-

leges and secrets they enjoy. You will win the early confidence and respect of the assembled Brother Knights by your own respect for our castle as you enter and by your dignity and fortitude thereafter. It is my duty to warn you too that the journey you are about to engage upon will prove a very rough and dangerous one—you will be beset by robbers and evil tempters. Are you willing to proceed in the face of these warnings? If so, say, I am.”

CAND: “I am.”

GOAT: “I will accordingly signal for admittance.”

(*Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat raps in code on castle door—door is opened by Brother Keeper of the Keys*)

KEYS: “Enter, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat and proceed with the candidate in the usual way, this being the order of our leader.”

(*Brother Keeper of the Keys closes and locks door, returning to his station, seating himself; Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat leads goat bearing candidate three times around lodge room, stopping finally before station of leader*)

GOAT: “Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder.”

LADD: “Yes, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat?”

GOAT: "Here is the candidate for further instruction."

LADD: "Fellow candidate, before we can reveal any of our secrets to you, you must kneel before me on the Carpet of Truth and swear to keep these secrets, never revealing them in any part to anybody without this secret order. Are you willing to so obligate yourself? If so, say, I am."

CAND: "I am."

LADD: "Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat."

GOAT: "Yes, Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder?"

LADD: "You will have the candidate dismount from the Sacred Goat and kneel before me on the Carpet of Truth to receive his obligation. But you will further stand by with the Sacred Goat as the candidate will need it in his further rough and dangerous journey into our domain."

GOAT: (*to candidate*) "It is the order of our leader that you dismount from the Sacred Goat and kneel before him on the Carpet of Truth. (*candidate dismounts*) Now kneel where you are. (*candidate kneels*) Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder, the candidate is now in readiness to assume his obligations."

LADD: (*raps six times with gavel—Brother Knights and officers arising*) "The Brother

Knights and officers will accordingly arise. (*to candidate*) Fellow candidate, you will repeat after me. Say, I—

CAND: "I—"

LADD: "—Samuel Horace Butterfield Rail—"

CAND: "—Samuel Horace Butterfield Rail—"

LADD: "—do hereby promise and swear—"

CAND: "—do hereby promise and swear—"

LADD: "—that I will forever keep the secrets—"

CAND: "—that I will forever keep the secrets—"

LADD: "—of this lodge."

CAND: "—of this lodge."

LADD: "I further promise and swear—"

CAND: "I further promise and swear—"

LADD: "—to try faithfully to live up to—"

CAND: "—to try faithfully to live up to—"

LADD: "—the daily rules of the Mystic Ladder—"

CAND: "—the daily rules of the Mystic Ladder—"

LADD: "—to start each morning with a clean face and hands—"

CAND: "—to start each morning with a clean face and hands—"

LADD: "—and throughout the day—"

CAND: "—and throughout the day—"

LADD: "—climb diligently and faithfully—"

CAND: "—climb diligently and faithfully—"

LADD: "—till I have honorably reached at night—"

CAND: "—till I have honorably reached at night—"

LADD: "—the topmost step in my ladder."

CAND: "—the topmost step in my ladder."

LADD: "I further promise and swear—"

CAND: "I further promise and swear—"

LADD: "—to attend lodge regularly—"

CAND: "—to attend lodge regularly—"

LADD: "—and execute faithfully—"

CAND: "—and execute faithfully—"

LADD: "—any duties assigned to me—"

CAND: "—any duties assigned to me—"

LADD: "—paying my dues regularly—"

CAND: "—paying my dues regularly—"

LADD: "—and standing ready at all times—"

CAND: "—and standing ready at all times—"

LADD: "—to assist a Brother Knight in distress—"

CAND: "—to assist a Brother Knight in distress—"

LADD: "—and further assist—"

CAND: "—and further assist—"

LADD: "—in the protection—"

CAND: "—in the protection—"

LADD: "—of the Mystic Ladder—"

CAND: "—of the Mystic Ladder—"

LADD: "—which I shall always hold in great respect—"

CAND: "—which I shall always hold in great respect—"

LADD: "—ever ready—"

CAND: "—ever ready—"

LADD: "—to profit by the lessons it teaches."

CAND: "—to profit by the lessons it teaches."

LADD: "To all of which—"

CAND: "To all of which—"

LADD: "—I most earnestly promise and swear."

CAND: "—I most earnestly promise and swear."

(leader raps once with gavel, Brother Knights and officers seating themselves with the exception of the Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat)

LADD: "Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat."

GOAT: "Yes, Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder?"

LADD: "The candidate having taken our solemn and binding oath, in the presence of our assembled Brother Knights, you will see that he arises, again mounts the Sacred Goat, and proceeds on his journey."

GOAT: (to candidate) "It is the order of our

leader that you now arise from the Carpet of Truth, again mount the Sacred Goat, and proceed on your journey. (*candidate arises and mounts goat*) As you will be unable to see for yourself I will further serve as your guide."

(*goat is led here and there in lodge room and finally up an incline*)

GOAT: "Hold fast to your seat, fellow candidate, as we are now ascending a most hazardous mountain path where a single misstep could prove fatal. Nor is that our only danger here, for it is known that a wicked robber band holds forth here. (*excitedly*) But, stop!—I hear voices in the rocks!"

(*goat stops*)

1 RB. (*wickedly*) "Here comes a lone wayfarer on a goat, let us kill and rob him."

2 RB: (*cautiously*) "No!—see! He has an armed guide—we dare not attack him lest we ourselves be slain."

1 RB: "Then what say you that we hie to our secret den and arouse our brother robbers?"

2 RB: "Well said! With force we will attack the pair at the other end of the defile."

GOAT: (*leading goat down incline—guarded excited voice*) "Quick!—hold tightly to your seat and we will turn down here by the hidden

waterfall and thereby escape from them."

(sound of waterfall is created by pouring water from one bucket into another)

GOAT: (stops) "Let us rest here for a few minutes beside this friendly waterfall and refresh ourselves."

(Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat proceeds to eat sandwich)

GOAT: (surprised) "Why, friend candidate! —you aren't eating! Haven't you any food?"

CAND: "No."

GOAT: (gives candidate half of sandwich)
"Then take this from me, in turn giving part to your mount, thus learning two important lessons in character building: To share with others deserving, and to be kind to dumb animals.
(candidate gives half of his food to goat, eating balance) I see you are ready to proceed, so let us go on. (startled) But wait! Ahead of us lurks the Black Imp. There he comes, carrying his unworthy ladder. There comes the Knight of the Gold Star too, carrying his splendid ladder. The Black Imp is going to speak first."

IMP: (gruff, evil voice) "Halt!"

GOAT: "By what right do you interrupt our journey into the land of the Mystic Ladder?"

IMP: "I am the Black Imp, and have here the ladder the candidate is seeking."

STAR: (*commandingly*) "Away, scoundrel! I have here the ladder the candidate is seeking."

IMP: "My ladder is easiest to climb."

STAR: "Yes, but if the candidate climbs your ladder he'll have nothing but black pegs at the week end to his credit. He'll never get his name in the Honor Book of our castle, or get a Gold Star."

IMP: (*sneeringly*) "He doesn't care anything about a Gold Star! What he wants is to climb the Ladder of Life the easiest way—that is the way I offer him."

STAR: (*touching candidate's arm*) "Look, fellow candidate! Here is a cake of soap and a basin of water. With these you can keep clean. The first step in *my* ladder is *Wash Thoroughly Every Morning.*"

IMP: "Yes, and if you climb my ladder you won't have to touch soap and water—the first step in *my* ladder is *Let Yourself Go Dirty.*"

STAR: "Look! Here is a toothbrush and tooth-paste. With these you can keep your teeth bright and shining—for the second step in *my* ladder is *Brush Your Teeth Morning and Night.*"

IMP: (*to candidate*) "Tell him to throw that old toothbrush away! Brushing your teeth is just a waste of valuable time. The second step

in *my* ladder is *Let Your Teeth Go Dirty.*"'

STAR: "Here is a tray of food set out for us—a bowlful of breakfast food and a pitcher of milk. These are good for you, as are well-cooked vegetables and meats for other meals, with not too much sweet stuff. To grow up right, and to be strong and healthy, you must *Eat Right*—the third step in *my* ladder."

IMP: "Bah! Don't eat that stuff, or vegetables or meat either if you can fill up on pie and cake. The third step in *my* ladder is *Eat Anything You Like.*"

STAR: "We are sent to school to learn things, so that we can get the greatest possible enjoyment out of life and be of greatest service to those around us. We can't learn things if we don't study in school. The fourth step in *my* ladder is *Study Hard.*"

IMP: "Bah! Studying is tiresome. People lived before they had schools and books. You can too. Besides, it's more fun to play. The fourth step in *my* ladder is *Don't Waste Time Studying.*"

STAR: "Play is all right, and after studying hard we should all *Play Hard*—the fifth step in *my* ladder."

IMP: "*Play All the Time* is the fifth step in *my* ladder—no studying at all."

STAR: "Boys should be neat and comb their hair—so *my* sixth step is *Be Neat.*"

IMP: "Bah! Another waste of time. *My* sixth step is *No More Combing.*"

STAR: "Boys should be honest."

IMP: (*enticingly to candidate*) "Oh, look!—here's some money someone dropped here. Let's divide it between us before the owner gets back."

STAR: "Stay, fellow candidate! It isn't your money. To take it would be stealing."

IMP: "Take it, I tell you! Here, let me slip it into your pocket."

CAND: "No."

STAR: "Spoken nobly, fellow candidate! You can't get far up the Ladder of Life unless you observe *my* seventh step—*Be Honest.*"

IMP: "Bah! *My* seventh step is *Take Anything You See.*"

STAR: "Boys should *Be Truthful*—the eighth step in *my* ladder. Nobody likes a liar—nobody trusts a liar."

IMP: "Yes, but if you can get away with it it's all right. *Lie If You Can Cover It Up* is the eighth step in *my* ladder."

STAR: "Boys should *Be Kind*—the ninth step in *my* ladder."

IMP: "You'll be a sissy if you listen to him."

Fight for what you want whether you have a right to it or not. *Use 'em Rough* is my ninth step."

STAR: "Boys should *Be Loyal*—the tenth step in *my* ladder—loyal to their country, to their comrades and parents, to their school and church, and to everybody to whom loyalty is due."

IMP: "*Don't Bother With Loyalty* is the tenth step in *my* ladder."

STAR: "Boys should *Be Obedient*—the eleventh step in *my* ladder."

IMP: "Why mind your parents and teachers all the time? *Be Your Own Boss* is the eleventh step in *my* ladder."

STAR: "Here are the steps in *my* ladder: Wash Thoroughly Every Morning, Brush Your Teeth Morning and Night, Eat Right, Study Hard, Play Hard, Be Neat, Be Honest, Be Truthful, Be Kind, Be Loyal, Be Obedient, and the topmost is, *Get Plenty of Sleep.*"

IMP: "The topmost step of *my* ladder is *Stay Up As Late As You Want To*. My ladder is the easiest to climb."

STAR: "But if you climb *my* ladder you gain honors. You gain friends. You please your parents and teachers. You make people like you. Your chums will like you better. When you get

to be a man you'll be a real man like your father, as he wants you to be."

GOAT: (*to candidate*) "Well, fellow candidate, what is your wish? Which of the two ladders thus presented to you do you wish to climb?"

IMP: (*enticingly*) "Climb my ladder."

CAND: "No!"

STAR: "Climb my ladder."

CAND: "Sure I will."

GOAT: "That being your decision we will return to the Castle Court and so inform our leader."

(*Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat leads goat bearing candidate to station of leader*)

GOAT: "Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder."

LADD: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat?"

GOAT: "On our journey we were beset by robbers and then by the Black Imp, who tried to persuade the candidate to climb his unworthy ladder. Then came the Knight of the Gold Star who told the candidate the moral advantages of climbing *his* ladder."

LADD: "What ladder has the candidate elected to climb?"

GOAT: "The ladder of the Knight of the Gold Star."

LADD: "This proves the candidate's worthiness of purpose. (*raps six times with gavel, Brother Knights and officers arising*) Brother Knights, you have heard the report of our Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat. Shall we or shall we not fully receive the candidate into our order? Those in favor say, aye. (VOTE) Those opposed say, no. (VOTE) The candidate is duly received. Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat, you will now escort the candidate to our Brother Keeper of the Keys, to be given his key to our castle, which opens up to him all its rights and privileges. When he has been given in addition the proper grips, signs and secret words he will be returned to me for final instruction."

(*leader raps once with gavel, Brother Knights and officers seating themselves, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat leading goat with mount to station of Brother Keeper of the Keys*)

GOAT: "Brother Keeper of the Keys."

KEYS: (*arises*) "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat?"

GOAT: "The candidate having been deemed worthy of admittance into our order, it is the order of our leader that you now present him with the key due him and acquaint him with the signs, grips and secret words of our order."

(key, grips, signs and secret words are given to candidate)

KEYS: "You will now return the candidate to our leader for final instruction."

(Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat leads goat with mount to station of leader)

GOAT: "Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder."

LADD: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat?"

GOAT: "In compliance with your order the candidate has been given by our Brother Keeper of the Keys a key to our castle, and has been properly instructed in the signs, grips and secret words that he henceforth will use in our secret sessions here. He now awaits your final instructions, as ordered."

LADD: "Let the new Brother Knight's blindfold be removed, for henceforth he will walk in the light of the valuable truths that our Mystic Ladder portrays."

(candidate's blindfold is removed)

LADD: "The new Brother Knight will further dismount from the Sacred Goat, which will be led without our castle gate, to serve the next worthy wayfarer who comes seeking the Great Truths of the Mystic Ladder."

(candidate dismounts, goat is led away as

ordered, Brother Keeper of the Keys unlocking and opening door, then closing and locking it again, returning to his station and seating himself)

LADD: "My new Brother Knight, you have elected to climb the Ladder of Life in the way that will gain for you, in the end, the greatest honors, the greatest personal satisfaction and the greatest respect of those around you. It is to your credit that you were not misled by the persuasive arguments of the Black Imp. No boy can enjoy the companionship of another boy who isn't clean. A boy may not always have the best clothes—he may even have to wear very poor clothes—but he can at least wash himself and try to be as neat as possible. It is the effort that counts. In the same way no boy cares for the companionship of a liar or cheat. We are a long time getting to the top of the Ladder of Life, but here in our lodge each member has a personal ladder that he climbs daily. (*presents small wooden ladder to newly elected member*) Here is the ladder that has been prepared in advance for you. Each step, you'll notice, is divided into seven sections, one section for each day in the week, and in each section there is a peg-hole. Here are black and gold pegs. You start in the morning at the bottom and climb the

ladder in that section for the day. The black pegs are the pegs of the Black Imp, still hopeful that you will drop to his sloppy dishonest methods. The gold pegs are the pegs of the Knight of the Gold Star. You will make your daily climbs, crediting yourself honestly at each day's end. At our next regular meeting your ladder will be inspected by our Knight of the Gold Star, and should the ladder contain only gold pegs your name will be inscribed in our Honor Book and distinguished by a Gold Star. (*displays honor book*) Here is our Honor Book, containing the names of all members and a lasting report of their accomplishments—or failures. Your name will appear here as Brother Knight number three. Let your record in this book be a worthy one. (*raps three times with gavel*) Brother Knights and officers, you will now greet our newly elected brother and make a place for him among you.”

(*greeting and seating of new member*)

LADD: (*at station*) “Brother Keeper of the Keys.”

KEYS: (*at station—arises*) “Yes, Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder?”

LADD: “If there be no disturbing signs without our castle I order that our Brother Lookout be relieved, after the usual injunction to our

Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat without our gate.”

KEYS: “Brother Lookout.”

LOOK: “Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?”

KEYS: “How looks it from your tower?”

LOOK: “All is clear to the horizon.”

KEYS: “Then it is the order of our leader that you issue the usual injunction to our Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat, without our gate, and descend from your tower that you may assist in our closing exercises.”

LOOK: (*calls*) “Hail, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat.”

GOAT: “What hails you, Brother Lookout?”

LOOK: “The candidate having been duly initiated, and all business transacted, it is the order of our leader that I descend from duty and that you present yourself within that we may both assist in the closing exercises.”

(*Brother Lookout descends, stands at attention at door*)

(*Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat gives five raps on door*)

LOOK: “Brother Keeper of the Keys.”

KEYS: “Yes, Brother Lookout?”

LOOK: “Our Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat has signaled for admittance, that he may attend our closing exercises as ordered.”

KEYS: "You may admit him with your own key."

(*Brother Lookout unlocks and opens door*)

LOOK: "Enter, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat."

(*Brother Lookout closes and locks door, then stands at attention beside door, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat standing at attention at other side*)

LOOK: "Brother Keeper of the Keys."

KEYS: "Yes, Brother Lookout?"

LOOK: "As ordered, Brother Keeper of the Sacred Goat and I are ready with you and the assembled Brother Knights to assist our leader in his closing duties."

KEYS: "Most High and Noble Keeper of the Mystic Ladder."

LADD: "Yes, Brother Keeper of the Keys?"

KEYS: "As ordered, we stand in readiness to assist you in your closing duties."

LADD: (*raps six times with gavel—assembled Brother Knights and officers arise, leader included*) "If there be no objection from our Brother Knights I will now proceed to close. (*pause*) There being no objection, I now declare this, the first Up-the-Ladder lodge of America, duly closed."

CHAPTER VIII

THE HIDDEN MONEY

MRS. MEYERS came in just as we finished.

"Well, how did the initiation turn out?" she beamed, almost as much interested in our new lodge as we were ourselves.

"Swell," I told her, happy and proud.

"Where's Sammy?" she looked around.

"H-h-here I am," he popped into sight.

"Did you actually ride the goat?" she asked him, with a quizzical look.

"S-s-sure thing," he told her, stepping around.

"Well, I'm glad you're still able to walk," she commented dryly. "I've been in the house on needles and pins expecting every minute to hear a smack up here and a yell. I even looked up the hospital number so I could get it in a hurry if I had to. But what are *you* looking for, Donald?" she asked Red, as he peeped furtively down the stairs.

"We've been afraid of spies to-night."

"Is Piledriver still in the anteroom?" I asked him.

"Sure thing."

"Well, he'll fix the spies if they come around."

"Yes, ma," Red laughed, "we've been teaching him to bunt spies."

"A wonderful goat, I suppose!" she spoke dryly.

"I'll tell the world! And can he bunt! Um . . . I'd hate to be the spy who tried to get past him."

"Well, I'm glad he didn't mistake me for a spy," Mrs. Meyers spoke anxiously.

"Did you see any of the neighbor kids hanging around downstairs, ma?"

"No, there wasn't anybody down there when I came up—at least not that I could see."

"I've been almost wishing that one of them would come up now," Red laughed.

"Why?" his mother asked.

"Oh, so Piledriver could get a little practice." Horse Foot was studying his ladder.

"W-w-what was that again, Jerry?" he asked me, puzzled.

"What was what?"

"About the b-b-black pegs. Where did you say t-t-to put them?"

I told him all over again how it worked, Mrs. Meyers listening attentively.

"Are *you* going to have a ladder like that too?" she asked Red.

"Sure thing," he told her, his eyes dancing. "I've got one already up in my room."

"Well, *I* think that's splendid," she complimented warmly. "To tell you the truth, I thought when you first talked about your lodge that it was going to be monkey-work. But I can see now that it serves a real purpose and probably will relieve us mothers of a lot of nagging. All the mothers in town will be wanting their boys to join when they hear about this. Why, I had no idea you boys could think up anything so clever. I'm amazed."

"Well, don't get amazed at me," Red grinned impishly. "Look at Jerry—he's the one who thought up the ladder idea."

Horse Foot put in a whole row of gold pegs for the next day.

"Now I've g-g-got to do it," he waggled fiercely.

"But if you fail in anything," I told him, "don't forget to change to black pegs."

"I w-w-won't fail," he declared grimly. "First thing to-morrow I'm going to w-w-wash

to beat the cars. But I b-b-bet my ma faints when I come down."

"You should show her your ladder when you get home to-night," Mrs. Meyers suggested laughingly, "and prepare her for the shock."

"N-n-no," Horse Foot waggled, his mind set. "I'm going to s-s-surprise her."

Mrs. Meyers offered me her hand.

"Well, Jerry, let me congratulate you. It's a great idea and you deserve a lot of credit for originating it."

"Don't give *me* all the credit," I told her, feeling silly. "Red had just as much to do with it as me, if he'd only admit it."

Red poked up the fire.

"Won't you stay and have some popcorn with us, ma?" he invited.

"No, I just ran out to see how Sammy withstood his initiation—hoping for the best. You boys mustn't stay up here too late now. Remember, you've got school to-morrow."

"Just a half hour," Red promised. "We've got to celebrate a little bit, for this is a big night for us."

"Yes," I joked, "this may go down in history as the night of the first initiation of a world-wide Up-the-Ladder lodge."



"GOOD HEAVENS, DONALD!" SQUEAKED MRS. MEYERS.
"IT'S YOUR FATHER!"

"Which isn't such a wild idea either," Mrs. Meyers spoke thoughtfully. "If the mothers here approve of it there's no reason why the mothers in other towns shouldn't do likewise. Speaking from a mother's viewpoint, I should say the wider and faster it spreads the better."

There was a sudden clatter of hoofs as Pile-driver took off down the stairs lickety-cut.

"Come on, Jerry." Red flew after him. "He smells spies."

When we got down, and out, the goat had someone up Red's apple tree.

"Good heavens, Donald!" squeaked Mrs. Meyers, peeking up in the moonlight. "It's your father."

"What are you doing up there, pa?" Red joked. "Are you picking apples?—or trying to lay an egg?"

"It's come to a pretty pass when a man can't go into his own barn without being chased out by a goat," growled Mr. Meyers, when we got the goat back and he got down, brushing and gingerly feeling himself over.

"He thought you were a spy," explained Red.

"He did the same thing this afternoon when I went into the barn for the bucksaw," Mr. Meyers further growled.

"Sure thing," nodded Red, "we've trained

him to chase spies. But he didn't chase you, ma—did he?"

"No, thank heaven!"

"I'm no spy," growled Mr. Meyers, just about the crossest I ever had seen him.

"It's your smell," said Red.

"I don't smell bad either, if that's what you mean," Mr. Meyers got huffier.

"We've been training him with a pair of your stuffed pants."

"My stuffed pants?"

"Yes—to bunt. He remembered the smell. But we'll get another pair to-morrow. He'll be all right, pa. He's smart."

"Well, you better instruct him to brush up on his geometry," growled Mr. Meyers, stalking off, "or he won't last long here."

"Did you hear that, Piledriver?" Red lectured the goat, who was nibbling on something that looked suspiciously like a piece of Mr. Meyers' coat-tail. "You shouldn't chase pa that way, for he's no spy. He's the one who buys the bread and butter around here."

Mrs. Meyers tittered as Mr. Meyers banged in the back door.

"I wish I could have seen your father go up that tree," she told Red. "I didn't know he

could climb a tree—with that bay-window of his.”

“Did Piledriver really go for him this afternoon too?” Red asked.

“That’s what he just said—that’s all I know about it. But I better run in and get the liniment bottle.”

She went off, still tittering.

Putting the goat to bed in his stall down-stairs, we went up and had a dandy half hour popping corn, after which we closed the stove securely and locked up for the night, all eager for another Wednesday night to roll around so that we could take in either Scoop or Peg, it having been agreed that we were to have one regular lodge meeting a week.

Horse Foot came out of his house the following morning the neatest I ever had seen him, which got things started there exactly as he had expected, his mother standing it till Saturday morning and then wheezing in to unburden herself as usual.

Sammy was keeping secrets from her, she began. He had something locked up in his top dresser drawer, and all he’d say, when questioned about it, was “Up-the-Ladder.” But more mystifying still was his new interest in himself.

“It used to be,” she ran on to Mother, “I had

to drive him to the wash basin, but now I almost have to drag him away from it. The first time he tried to wear it out I didn't think so much of it—that was Thursday morning. I started to say to him as usual, now, Sammy, you go right back to the bathroom and wash yourself—and can you believe it, there he stood as clean as if he'd just come through a washing machine, with a clean shirt on and a clean handkerchief dangling from his pocket and *everything*. And his teeth!—why, Mrs. Todd, I never in all my life saw them so sparkling. Do you know what he further did that morning before he set out for school?"

"What?" Mother smiled.

"He *actually*—now this is the gospel truth, Mrs. Todd, every word of it—he *actually* polished his shoes—for the first time in his life."

"How splendid!" said Mother.

"Oh, but, Mrs. Todd, it wasn't natural. It wasn't like him at all. I could think of only one thing that would cause it, and when it happened again the next morning I—I just couldn't keep my tears back. He's growing up and growing away from me and it's breaking my heart." The visitor began sniffling into the hem of her apron. "He—he's got a girl!"

Horse Foot with a girl!

"He couldn't get a girl if he wanted to," I hooted the idea.

"Well, I don't know why not," his mother stiffened instantly. "He's the smartest boy in his room, and the most popular too."

"Oh, sure," I told her, as Mother signaled frantically to me. "He's smart, all right, and plenty popular. But I happen to know he isn't in love."

"Of course not," Mother put in sensibly. "He's just a child. And my advice to you, Mrs. Rail, is to thank your lucky stars for the change in him, instead of weeping about it."

"But what does he mean by Up-the-Ladder? Do you know, Jerry?"

"Sure I do. He's got a little wooden ladder in his dresser drawer."

"Why don't you get yours and show her, Jerry?" Mother suggested.

Which I did, carefully explaining it, Mrs. Rail going off singing to herself, her curiosity satisfied and her fears of a budding young love affair happily dispelled.

I lit out for Red's then, finding him locked in the lodge room.

"Is that you, Jerry?" he asked through the door, in a queer, excited voice, when I pounded for admittance.

"Yes. What's the matter?" I asked curiously.
"What are you locked in for?"

"Are you all alone?" he asked further, in the same queer, guarded voice.

"Sure thing. But hurry up and open up—what's the matter with you anyway?" my curiosity grew.

Opening the door then, he pulled me in quickly and quickly locked it again.

"I just found some money, Jerry," he told me excitedly.

"Money?" I stared.

"Yes, I just found a pile of old silver dollars hidden in the bottom of our stove."

"Don't kid me!" I snorted. "Nobody could hide money in a stove."

"Somebody hid money in *that* stove," he declared, "for I just found it there."

"But how could money last in a stove?" I asked, bewildered.

He then told me how he had found the money.

"I didn't know, till I got the ashes out, that the stove had a tile bottom—for keeping the bottom from getting too hot, I guess, and burning the floor. One of the tiles was broken and when I took it out I saw something under it. I thought it was an iron washer. But it wasn't a washer—it was a silver dollar, as black as iron

from the heat, but not the least bit melted. And with it, under the other tiles, I found two hundred and fifteen more—two hundred and sixteen in all.”

“Two hundred and sixteen dollars?” I gasped, more dumbfounded every minute.

“Nothing else but. Do you wonder now that I locked myself in?”

“But where are they?” I asked eagerly.

“Over there.” He showed me where he had hidden the blackened coins under our Carpet of Truth.

I took one of the coins to the light for closer examination.

“It’s a United States dollar all right,” I admitted.

“A two-hundred-and-sixteen-dollar stove for two dollars!” he laughed. “I guess that was a good buy, huh?”

“Is that what your pa paid for the stove?”

“Yes. And, boy, was I excited when I got those other tiles out and found out what was under them! I guess my eyes almost popped out of my head.”

“You haven’t got them clear back yet,” I told him laughingly.

“If only we could keep the money, huh, Jerry?”

"You don't mean *me*," I corrected. "It's your stove."

"Yes," he spoke loyally, "but if we found we could keep the money, you know blamed well you'd get a share of it."

Two hundred and sixteen dollars! Boy, that was a small fortune!

"Have you told your pa?" I asked excitedly.

"I haven't told anybody yet but you. But I think we better hunt up pa right away and find out where he got the stove, to trace the money to its rightful owner if we can. We want to be honest about it."

"What are you going to do with the money in the meantime?" I asked.

"Hide it up here. I know some dandy places."

"I suppose we could put it back in the stove," I laughed.

"Yes, and every time the stove started to get red we'd shiver in our shoes. No, thanks! I can think of a hundred safer places than that. It's hard to comprehend how anybody would ever hide money there in the first place—that is if the stove was in use at the time. But the money may have been put there when the stove stood idle in somebody's attic."

"Boy, I bet your pa will be surprised when he hears about this!"

"I was just wondering, Jerry—can't we keep it to ourselves for a little while? Pa probably wouldn't tell about it, but he might at that, and then there's no telling who wouldn't show up here to try and gyp us out of the money."

"There's something in that too," I agreed thoughtfully, wanting to play safe.

"There wouldn't be anything dishonest in keeping mum for a while, if we really tried to find the money's rightful owner," he argued.

"Yes," I further agreed, "it might even help us get the money into the right hands."

"Then we'll do it, huh?" he leaned forward eagerly.

"That suits me," I nodded.

"Just you and me—till we find out the truth about it, huh?"

"Just you and me," I further nodded.

CHAPTER IX

DETECTING

THE money put away in three separate hiding places, we locked the lodge room and ran down town.

“Say, pa,” cried Red, when we tumbled in on his father in his theatre office, “where did you buy that stove of ours?”

“Huh?” grunted Mr. Meyers, with his nose in a business letter. “What’s that?”

“The stove you bought us for our lodge room —where did you get it?”

“Don’t tell me,” scowled Mr. Meyers, “that you’ve let that high-powered goat of yours kick a hole through it already?”

“No,” laughed Red, “it’s all right. You’re the only thing around there that Piledriver likes to kick around.”

Mr. Meyers raised himself painfully.

“In the shade of the old apple tree,” he sang, in his crazy way.

“Tell us about the stove, pa. Who did you buy it from?”

“That new second-hand dealer over on Canal street—with chin whiskers.”

“Since when did Canal street get chin whiskers?” laughed Red.

“Well, you go over and look at that dealer,” his father told him, “and you’ll see who’s got the whiskers.”

“Did he say where he got the stove?”

“Not that I recall. But why all this sudden interest in it? I’m intrigued.”

“Whatever that is,” laughed Red, running off with me after him.

I had heard that there was a new second-hand dealer in town but I hadn’t seen him, to know him, till Red and I called on him that morning.

“Oh, oh!” said Red, as the dealer hobbled toward us through his cluttered store. “I guess you remember him, Jerry.”

“No,” I whispered back. “I never saw him before.”

“Sure you did—the night we were chasing Piledriver. Don’t you remember the old man under the street light?”

“Oh, sure! We asked him about the goat and he thought we said ghost.”

“I suppose we’ll have to talk pretty loud to him.”

“Well, listen!” I advised hastily. “Don’t say,

anything to get him suspicious—for if he found out about the money he might try to claim it himself. Quiz him guardedly.”

“Leave it to me,” Red spoke confidently.

We started in looking at old books, gradually getting around to where the stoves were.

“Didn’t you have an old-fashioned stove about this size and about this high,” Red measured with his hands, “with a cooking top?”

“Tops?” the old man cupped his ear. “No, I don’t handle tops.”

“A stove with a flat cooking top,” Red whooped it up. “Didn’t you have one about this size and about this long?” he measured again.

“Yes, I had a stove like that,” the old man waggled, “but it’s gone now. Only one I ever seed like it too.”

“Where did you buy it?” Red whooped.

The old man combed his whiskers.

“Now, let me see! Oh, yes!—I remember now. That was included in some household goods I bought last week from a woman.”

“Do you remember her name?”

“I don’t think she give me her name. Nope, I remember now, I started to write her a check but she said no, she wanted cash. I didn’t git her name at all.”

“Then you don’t know where she lives?”

"Nope. Never seed her before. Total stranger to me—but then most of the people 'round here are. Jest opened up last month."

"Was she a Tutter woman?—do you know that?"

"Little woman? Nope, she was tall and gaunt. The mannish type."

"Did she tell you anything about the stove?"

"Only that it was in good condition."

I tugged at Red's sleeve.

"Ask him what else the woman sold him."

"Why?"

"Well, you ask him."

We wound up in another part of the store where the old man showed us two very old stuffed chairs.

"There was the stove, three chairs like this an' a table." He gave us a list of his purchases from the woman.

"Did the table have a drawer?" I asked, trying to hide my excitement. You can see what was going on in my mind. If the mysterious early owner of the household goods had hidden money in one place, why not in another?—and what better place than in a secret compartment of a table drawer?

"Let me see," the old man further combed his whiskers. "Did that table have a drawer

or not? Nope," he finally decided, "it didn't."

"Who got it, and the other chair?" I asked.

"Some old lady who came in. I sold her the two pieces fur three dollars."

"I'll give you fifty cents apiece for the two chairs," I offered.

"Um. . . . No profit fur me in the deal at that price. But I tell you what: a dollar an' ten cents cash and they're yours."

"You hold them for me," I told him, "and I'll come back and get them."

Red was feeling pretty good when we got out.

"I was scared pink," he laughed, "that I'd find out who the woman was."

"It's a cinch she didn't know the money was in the stove," I reasoned, "or she never would have sold it."

"Do you know what I think, Jerry?" he sobered thoughtfully.

"What?" I asked eagerly.

"I think whoever hid the money died, without a word of it, and this woman got the money-hider's furniture. She didn't need it—or maybe she thought it wasn't good enough for her—anyway she sold it for what she could get for it."

"Then the money really is hers, if the furniture was hers."

"Yes," Red nodded, "I guess we'll have to cough up to her if we ever find her—hoping of course that we won't! But tell me," he quizzed, "why did you buy the chairs?"

"Hoping that I'd find something too," I told him, with dancing eyes.

He saw right off what I meant.

"Say, maybe you will, Jerry!" he spoke excitedly.

"A stuffed chair seat would seem to me to be a lots better hiding place for money than a stove."

"Sure thing, paper money especially."

"You just found silver money," I joked. "I'm going to find thousand-dollar bills."

"Let's hurry and get the dollar and ten cents and get the chairs home and find out! Boy, is this ever a day! Two hundred and sixteen dollars already and maybe thousands more in those chair seats, as you say!"

But all we found in the chair seats, when we went at them in the locked lodge room, was cotton packing so old it smelt like a rat's nest. It was a big disappointment, but still we got two good lodge chairs out of it, one for Red and the other for me. When we retacked the worn upholstering the chairs were just as good as ever.

Horse Foot was hiding disguised behind a

tree when I got home for supper that night.

"Sh!" He mysteriously raised a finger to his whiskered lips, as I stopped.

"What's the matter with you?" I asked curiously.

"I'm d-d-detecting," he told me, peering out both sides of the tree intently.

"Oh, go on in the house and eat your supper," I told him. "You're crazy."

"I've g-g-got a clue," he told me, coming out.

"Yes, and you've got bats in your belfry too," I grunted.

"I s-s-saw her to-day, Jerry."

"Saw who?"

"The p-p-parrot woman."

"Is that where you've been all day?" I asked, wondering if he had any sense at all.

"S-s-she came out and pumped a p-p-pail of water," he went on.

"What of it?"

"That w-w-was the clue."

"The pail of water?" I began to grin.

"S-s-sure thing."

"Horse Foot," I told him, drawing my face down, "I believe you've got something there."

"M-m-me too," he wagged.

"Certainly," I probed the situation thoughtfully, "she wouldn't pump a pail of water to

get herself a drink or to wash the dishes."

"Not such a b-b-big pail," he waggled again.

"Oh! So it was a big pail, eh?" I pretended more interest. "That certainly looks suspicious —especially if the pail had a handle. But what did she look like?—describe her."

"S-s-she had on big overshoes and a s-s-shawl."

"I suppose she had the overshoes on her feet," I further considered.

"Y-y-yes, unless she was upside-down," was his crazy reply.

"Now, we're getting some place," I spoke excitedly. "We know she's got feet and a head or she couldn't wear overshoes and a shawl. Did you detect any signs of a body too?"

"S-s-sure thing—with a dirty red dress on."

"The color of blood! Br-r-r! How about hands?—or did she carry the pail handle in her teeth?"

He stepped back, scowling.

"Are you trying to k-k-kid me?"

"Why, Horse Foot!" I honied him, long-faced. "How could you ever suspect such a thing? But what is your idea about the pail of water?"

"I'm still w-w-working on it," he waggled.

"That's the spirit," I praised, patting him on the head. "If the bottom of the pail baffles you, try the top. Don't ever let it be said of you that you gave up on the first pint."

"I s-s-saw the parrot too," he further told me.

"Did the woman have it with her when she pumped the water?" I asked, genuinely interested this time.

"N-n-no, she let it fly out of an east window."

"An east window, huh? Then that must be her side of the house—Mrs. Meyers told us that the woman and her brother lived in separate rooms on opposite sides."

"I d-d-didn't see anything on the west side."

"Well, naturally you couldn't expect to see very much there," I told him dryly, "for the man who used to live there was buried almost two weeks ago. But don't give up too soon. Let me know if you get any more important clues."

He went off, jumping furtively from tree to tree, disappearing finally into his house, his mother squealing with fright at sight of him.

He sure was a funny little egg all right!

Little did I dream then of what his "detecting" would finally lead to.

Boy!

CHAPTER X

MORE MYSTERY

HORSE Foot came to lodge the following Wednesday night with seven rows of gold pegs in his ladder, thus being the first to get a Gold Star in the Honor Book. He was using so much soap and toothpaste, he told us, that his ma was buying it by the dollars' worth, instead of one cake and one tube at a time. She also had had to stock up on shoe polish.

"I'm g-g-going to get a Gold Star every w-w-week," he told us determinedly.

"That's the spirit," I told him, proud of him. Red got around by me.

"Let's see your ladder, Jerry," he requested.

"I didn't do as good as Horse Foot," I admitted sheepishly.

"What happened?" asked Red, spotting my one black peg.

"Oh, I sassed the teacher one day before I thought."

"Yes," Red confessed, "and I skipped the back of my neck a couple of mornings. But con-

found it, if that kid can get all gold pegs I can too. You wait till next week!"'

"I'll be with you," I told him grimly.

Scoop was waiting downstairs, and at the proper time, with Horse Foot in the Lookout Tower, the initiation began, with just as much fun as before. This time, though, Mr. Meyers didn't get around afterwards to get chased, so we missed that fun. In our bunting practice with Piledriver now we had another pair of stuffed pants, so that everything around there would be safe for Mr. Meyers from then on.

The money that Red had found in the stove was still hidden up there, and when the others had gone he and I sat down beside the stove to talk it over, to decide whether to tell his pa about it then or keep on secretly searching for its owner, Mrs. Meyers coming in at nine-thirty with word that an old friend of ours, Grandma Carey, had just phoned from her little cottage on the edge of town for us to come out there right away.

"You mean," Red stared at his mother, "that she wants us to come out there to-night?"

"That's what she said—but if you and Jerry stay there all night, don't you sit up till midnight, as you did the last time you slept there."

Red turned to me wonderingly.

"Did you expect anything like that, Jerry?" he asked.

"No," I told him, as mystified as he was.

"It's funny she invited us out there in the middle of the week. We never stayed there before except on Friday nights—when there was school."

"She said someone was peeping in her windows," Mrs. Meyers told us.

"Who? Did she say?" Red asked quickly.

"No. She just said she was frightened and wanted you boys to come out. The poor old lady! I've been fearful all along that she'd get a scare out there by herself. I tried to get her to call the police, but she said she wanted to talk with you boys first."

It was Grandma Carey, you know, who gave us the exciting history of the old tin bathtub that I told about in my last book. Up in her seventies, and one of the nicest white-haired old ladies I ever had known, she lived alone for years in her little place, raising geese and piecing out her slender income with an occasional practical nursing job. She isn't my real grandma, but she's the kind you'd naturally call grandma when you got to know her real well. Everybody likes her, and glad to be of help to her now, though mystified, Red and I got into our heavy

sweaters and started for her house through a fast-growing snowfall.

"Who do you think it is, Jerry?" asked Red, as we hurried along through the deepening snow, our heads bent forward to keep the flakes out of our eyes.

"The peeper?—I can't imagine, unless it's some tramp. Her neighbors wouldn't do anything like that. It's queer though that she sent for us instead of the police."

"If we stay all night," said Red, "you'll have to phone to your mother."

"Yes, I mustn't forget that."

We had to go down Main street to Zulu street and then around the corner, a ten-minute walk in all, the big pine trees in Grandma Carey's yard finally coming dimly into sight ahead of us. The trees were beautiful with the new feathery snow clinging to them, and yet they gave me the shivers too. I kept wondering, as we turned in and went around to the door of the lighted kitchen, if someone we couldn't see was furtively watching us through the low-hung branches.

Grandma Carey met us white-faced at the door, her eyes going anxiously into the darkness beyond in the brief instant that the door was open.

"It was good of you boys to come," she told us gratefully, when we were safe inside with the door locked again. "And yet, after I had sent for you, I regretted it—fearful that something might happen to you before you could get in the house. There's nothing that woman wouldn't do, and I wouldn't go outside myself, and run the chance of facing her out there, for anything in the world."

"What woman?" I asked quickly "Who are you talking about?"

There was a slight sound at the window behind us, and when we wheeled, startled, Grandma Carey clutching me terrified, somebody out there quickly stepped back out of sight.

"There she is now!" gasped Grandma Carey, falling weakly against me.

"Pull the shade down," I told Red, supporting the old lady to a chair and holding her there to keep her from collapsing completely.

"Oh, dear!" she moaned. "Why is that woman persecuting me? I've done nothing to her, except my duty to her brother, and had hoped after his death never to see her again. She's come here with some queer, revengeful twist in her mind. Probably I should have sent for the police after all—but I hated to be drawn into any trouble with her, or have her arrested

for window peeping, fearful of the consequences later."

Another unmistakable sound outside the window sent Grandma Carey off the chair in a dead faint, Red at the same time letting out a squeal like a cornered rabbit. He tried frantically to get the police station on the phone, while I worked over the prostrate old lady, but learned that since the call put through to us either the growing snow on the wires had pulled them down or they had been purposely pulled down by human scheming hands.

It was the scariest thing *I* ever was mixed up in, and to this day I don't know exactly what I did to help the old lady. But she finally sat up, and with no further sounds outside except the rising wind, we finally got to breathing more naturally again.

"Who was it?" I asked Grandma Carey, when she could talk. "You haven't told us yet."

"You probably don't know her, Jerry—she lives down by the river in a big stone house, the evilest old woman I ever came in contact with. Her name is Miss Florence Thorburton."

The parrot woman!

"Did you hear that?" I turned pop-eyed to Red.

"Yes," he stared back open-mouthed.

"Do you boys know her?" Grandma Carey asked us, regarding us curiously.

"We know of her," I replied. "Why was she spying on you?"

"That's something, Jerry, I can't for the life of me figure out, unless she suspects that her brother told me something about her before his death and intends to get rid of me before I can repeat it, to her possible injury."

It was the unnerved old lady's further story that she had been called to the big stone house to nurse the now dead man in his final illness, the sister herself refusing to lift a finger to help him, so strained were the relations between them.

"It was a terribly ghostly place," Grandma Carey shivered from memory of it, "with bare rooms everywhere and that gaunt, yawning ballroom on the top floor. I thought, till I got there, that the guest rooms though unused for years were still furnished, but that miserly woman, I learned, had stripped every room except the two that she and her brother used. I even had to take out one of my own folding cots to sleep on and my own bedding, cooking for the patient on a little stove in his room. Had I known what I was getting into I never would have gone there at any price, but once there I tried to

make the best of it and do what I could for the poor man. But that woman! I knew from the first that she was trying to keep him from telling me something, for he showed pitifully that he had something on his mind, and every time he came out of his deepening stupor sufficiently to talk she'd put me aside and get between us. You can't imagine the fear in his hollow eyes when he saw her standing over him like a gaunt human vulture, even ready, it seemed to me, to tear at his throat if necessary to stop him. His eyes would turn pleadingly to me, and toward the last I tried hard to get his message so that he could die in peace, but always was thwarted by that hovering human vulture."

We listened spellbound, later telling our own story of the two orphans, undoubtedly the children of the discussed parrot woman's younger sister.

"Thank heaven the children escaped falling into that woman's evil clutches," Grandma Carey spoke fervently, when we came to the part about the post-card. "That look of fear in her dying brother's eyes proved plainly enough what he himself had had to endure there under her stronger will. His life must have been a wretched one, especially toward the end when his infirmities overcame him—and what a life

for her to live herself, selling everything down to her last rag almost to get more money to hide away, the only thing in the world seemingly that she had any affection for, a rascally parrot. She was disgusting enough herself, with her rags and dirt, but with that nasty parrot nibbling around her mouth she was absolutely sickening. She caught me putting it out of the sick room one time and flew at me like an enraged tigress. Oh, I tell you, boys, it was a long unhappy two weeks that I put in out there, thankful finally to get away with my life. I didn't think then I'd even go to the poor man's funeral, but I did out of respect. But tell me more about those poor children. How old were they?"

"The girl was fourteen and the boy ten," I gave their ages.

"You say they hadn't anything to eat?"

"I didn't see them myself, but that's Sammy Rail's story."

"If they were so fearful of their aunt, why did they ever come here in the first place?"

"It probably was the only place they had to come, but once they got here they were afraid to show themselves."

"Oh, how lucky for them that they didn't! Who was it took them away?"

"A friend, Annie said in her card—that's all we know about it. But those two paintings I told you about, and the way things fitted together, easily proved who the children were."

Grandma Carey's eyes became thoughtful.

"I have a faint recollection of Alameda Thorburton—a slim, sensitive-faced girl, very pretty, but constantly troubled-looking. Probably it was her unhappy home life, as I can readily imagine what she had to endure from that sister of hers. Boys, if ever the devil was born in a person it was born in that woman—and if you will, I want you to stay here with me a few nights more for protection. Or if she keeps coming here I'll go to the police regardless of the consequences. But maybe we should get ready for bed now, as I don't want to keep you up too late. You know where to sleep, in that little room at the head of the stairs—I left the register open to warm it. Tomorrow morning I'll have pancakes when you come down."

"Pancakes!" smacked Red. "Oh, boy!"

"What am I going to do about Mother?" I asked him, not wanting to go out to phone but feeling I should get word home somehow.

"She'll find out from my ma where you are, Jerry."

"Yes, but I've never stayed away before

without letting her know myself, and she'll worry even after she learns where I am."

"What was that, Jerry?" Grandma Carey came anxiously into the conversation. "Did I hear you say your mother doesn't know where you are?"

"Not unless Red's ma has phoned to her. I was over there when you called and came from there."

"Well, you certainly ought to phone to her if you think she'll worry."

Bucking up courage, I went out, learning that the snow had stopped and that the moon was faintly out. It was a heavy wet snow, halfway to my knees, and as I got into the path I detected deep footprints ahead of me going out. I could still see them going off toward town when I got to a neighbor's, where I phoned and hurried back.

"Did you see anything of the parrot woman, Jerry?" Red asked eagerly, when I tumbled in with snowy feet.

"No, she's gone home. I saw her tracks going out."

"Boy, I'd hate to have her walk to-night! It must be three miles down to her place at least."

I was thinking to myself that anybody who would walk that far on a stormy night must

have a terribly compelling purpose. However I didn't speak about it that way to Grandma Carey. Instead I talked to her as though the queer-acting parrot woman probably never would come back, though all the time, deep down in my heart, the conviction stuck that she *would* come back.

She did too!

CHAPTER XI

AT GRANDMA CAREY'S

GRANDMA CAREY slept in a little room off her cozy sitting-room, and when her light was out and we knew she was in bed, Red and I, in bed ourselves upstairs, quietly talked things over.

"Was your ma surprised when she learned where you were, Jerry?" he began.

"Yes, and I don't think she liked it very well either."

"Why?" he asked quickly. "What did she say?"

"Oh, she told me at first to come home, but finally said I could stay when I told her that Grandma Carey had been scared by a window peeper."

"I thought it was a man when ma first told us about it."

"So did I."

"I never dreamed it would turn out to be a woman—and particularly *that* woman. It looks like we're bound to bump into her, Jerry."

"Yes, first we spied on her in her home, think-

ing she had the two orphans shut up there, and now we're protecting Grandma Carey from her. She must be a terribly wicked old thing from all the things we've heard about her."

"Br-r-r!" Red shivered under the covers. "I'm glad for your sake that she wasn't out there when you went out."

"I was ready to run," I told him. "It was moonlight too. Unless she threw something at me I wasn't in any danger."

"But imagine her coming all that distance through the snow! It looks bad, if you ask me."

A clock below struck eleven.

"Pancakes!" smacked Red, his thoughts jumping to the promised breakfast. "Oh, boy, pancakes!"

"Go to sleep and dream about them," I yawned.

"I hope she makes plenty," he spoke longingly.

"You always got plenty before when you ate here, didn't you?"

"I wonder how long we'll have to stay here?" he next speculated.

"We'll stay as long as we're needed—if our mothers will let us."

"Mine will."

"I think mine will too, when I explain to her

just how things are out here. Certainly she wouldn't want anything terrible to happen here."

"Terrible?" Red repeated the word hollowly.
"What do you mean?—murder?"

"Well, I can't imagine the parrot woman coming all that distance through the snow just to peep at another old woman through the window. It was either an intended plan to threaten Grandma Carey into continued silence, or silence her in some more effective way."

"Grandma Carey doesn't know anything."

"Yes, but the parrot woman thinks she does and is scared Grandma Carey will tell—at least that's what Grandma Carey herself thinks."

"I wonder what that man's dying secret was," Red puzzled.

"Something pretty bad probably."

"Something his sister did, huh?—that she didn't want him to tell."

"That's what Grandma Carey thinks, but she doesn't know."

"I wish I knew what it was."

"Well, dream about it and we'll talk about it to-morrow. I'm sleepy now."

"I hope the windows are all locked." He spoke anxiously, sitting up and listening.

"There's no more danger to-night—go to sleep."

"Ho-hum!" he yawned, floundering around.

"And keep your big feet on your own side," I kicked.

"Say, cave-mouth, how much of the bed do you want?" he growled. "You've got two-thirds of it already."

"Like so much mud! If you've got to have a rack for your feet, pull up a chair and drape them on that, instead of my ribs."

"Say, Jerry," he nudged talkatively.

"Oh, go to sleep," I growled.

"What'll we do if she comes back to-morrow night?"

"Go out and play croquet with her."

"No, honest, what will we do?" he pressed.

"Phone for the police—if Grandma Carey will let us."

"The phone doesn't work."

"It can be fixed to-morrow—can't it?"

"We mustn't forget that," he spoke tensely. "I don't want to get caught here again without a phone. Listen to the wind in those pine trees!—they don't sound so good either?"

"Oh, pipe down—I'm sleepy."

"Listen to them moan in the wind."

"Yes," I popped up angrily, "and you'll be

moaning yourself, with a punch in the stomach, if you don't dry up. Didn't you hear the clock? It's time we were asleep."

Squirming till he got a nice nest for himself he finally dropped off, me after him, and after a long sound sleep and a swell breakfast we set out for school, counseling Grandma Carey to keep her doors locked till we got back at dark.

"What are we going to do about that money?" Red asked me, as we waded through the snow. "We were talking about it last night when ma came up, but hadn't reached a decision. Shall we tell pa to-day?—and see what he says about it?"

"Say, Red," I spoke thoughtfully, "I've got a crazy idea about that money—it came to me last night from something Grandma Carey said."

"What?" he quizzed eagerly. "Tell me."

"Well, do you suppose the stove came from that dead man's room in the stone house?"

"Say! I wonder!" his eyes swelled. "Grandma Carey *did* say something about cooking for him on a little stove in his room! It would be likely to be that kind of a stove all right! I bet you're right, Jerry!—just as right as right can be. I never thought of it myself."

"It's Grandma Carey's story that the par-

rot woman sold all the other furniture in the house except in her room and her brother's. After his funeral it would be like her to clean out his room too."

"A tall, gaunt woman!" Red repeated the description given us by the old second-hand dealer. "And Grandma Carey called her a gaunt human vulture! Yes, sir, Jerry, you've hit the nail on the head. That's where the stove came from just as sure as shootin'. But I'll be blamed," his eyes flashed, "if I ever give *her* the hidden money. I'll keep it till we hear again from the orphans. They need it a whole lot more than she does."

"If she legally inherited her brother's property, the money's hers, Red. I know how you feel about her—I'd rather give it to the orphans myself. But we want to do what's right."

"Then this is one time in my life," he held off in his stubborn, dogged way, "that I'm not going to do what's right. I'm going to keep that money for those orphans if I have to keep it fifty years. That's final too, Jerry, so you might just as well dry up about it and like it."

"Your pa may change your mind for you," I told him.

"Pa isn't going to hear about it right away. I had thought some of telling him to-day, but

now I've decided to wait awhile longer."

"But, Red," I told him sensibly, "you can't keep the money hidden up there forever."

"A week or two longer won't hurt any," he stuck doggedly to his plan.

We met the old second-hand dealer hobbling through the snow to his store.

"You boys hain't wantin' another of them old chairs, be you?" he asked us, recognizing us.

"I didn't know you had any more," I told him, surprised.

"There was three of 'em to start with, but the lady who bought the other one and a table brought the two pieces back yesterday, takin' something else. The chair's yours fur fifty cents, if you want it."

Telling him to save it for us, Red and I got it that noon, locking it up in the lodge room till we had more time to probe the upholstering carefully. To tell the truth we didn't expect to find anything—after our other failures. There wouldn't be likely to be money in one chair seat, we reasoned, and not in the others. But it was a chance, and fifty cents was plenty cheap for a good lodge chair. Having three of a kind was nice too.

Mother was skeptical when I told her that

noon at the dinner table that the window peeper was a woman—the parrot woman from the big stone house down by the river.

“If Grandma Carey saw the woman and recognized her, why doesn’t she notify the police, instead of keeping you boys out there?” I was asked.

“I think she will phone to the police to-night if the woman comes back.”

“Is the phone working again?”

“It should be for Red reported it from the schoolhouse this morning.”

“You really think the parrot woman, as you call her, pulled the wires loose last night?”

“Either that,” I waggled, “or they went down under the snow.”

“Oh, Jerry, I can’t make myself believe it! Grandma Carey must have been mistaken, or the whole thing is just a fancy of hers.”

“Fancy nothing! I heard the woman outside myself and saw her tracks too. She thinks Grandma Carey knows some secret about her that her brother told before his death—for Grandma Carey took care of him.”

“Yes, I understand that part all right, but I still don’t believe that that woman walked all that distance through the snow to peep into Grandma Carey’s house, or that the danger out

there is nearly as serious as the old lady leads you boys to believe. But if she is upset you can stay with her another night or two, though I'd much prefer to have you home with we."

"I'm going to take my pajamas to-night," I told her.

"Yes, and get your toothbrush and some clean handkerchiefs."

Grandma Carey was just starting supper when Red and I got there at five o'clock, and then about nine o'clock, as we sat quietly in the kitchen, we heard someone moving around outside as before. Once the doorknob turned stealthily, but somehow, as we sat there with the blinds drawn, I wasn't half as much afraid as the night before. Maybe it was the reconnected phone that gave me confidence, or maybe it was the door locks. But it was good not to be afraid—and then just as before the sounds stopped, with not a sign of the prowler except her new footprints when Red and I guardedly opened the door and slipped out.

"What did the phone man tell you about the wires?" I asked Grandma Carey, when we were all together again in the kitchen.

"He said it was the snow."

"Did you really see the woman, Grandma Carey?" I asked, beginning to wonder if pos-

sibly Mother wasn't a little bit right after all.

"See her?" the old lady spoke, greatly agitated. "I saw her just as plain as I see you, Jerry. I heard a sound at the east window, and when I turned, there she stood in full view. It isn't a fancy of mine, if that is what you're thinking."

"Why don't you phone to the police? Mother thinks you should."

"I'm still afraid of what she'd do to me, Jerry, if I had her arrested and she got out again. You can't comprehend what a revengeful, vicious person she is. I'd be afraid of my life afterwards. But if she comes back to-morrow night I surely will report her—and in time for the police to catch her here."

"Haven't you any idea, Grandma Carey, what her brother wanted to tell you on his deathbed?" I asked intently about that.

"No," the old lady shook her head.

"Couldn't you distinguish any words, like money—"

"—or stove?" Red put in.

"Stove?" she repeated, her puzzled eyes going back and forth between us.

"Did he say anything about a stove?" Red leaned forward eagerly.

"Why, no! He was too sick to talk about

stoves. What a ridiculous thing for you to ask!"

"What kind of a stove did he have in his room?" Red further probed.

The description given us fitted our stove perfectly, settling *that*.

"But why should you want to know about his stove?" Grandma Carey asked, puzzled.

"Oh, I just had a funny little idea—I get them sometimes. Did he say anything about a chair?"

"A chair? Why, Donald, what *can* be your purpose in asking such ridiculous questions? Of course he didn't say anything about a chair, or a stove either. He was too far gone to care about chairs and stoves. Once though I did think I detected the word 'will.' "

"You mean the legal kind of a will?"

"Yes, if that is what he actually said, that probably was the kind of a will he meant."

"Did he leave a will?" Red further quizzed.

"I presume he did or everybody wouldn't be so certain his sister had gotten his entire property."

"Suppose he didn't?" Red speculated.

"Then those orphans should come in for their mother's portion of his estate."

Red scratched his head.

"Jerry," he told me earnestly, "if it wasn't for that post-card I'd still say those kids were locked up out there and being cheated out of their rights. Maybe that's why the parrot woman is hanging around here—she may think her brother knew the children were around and had said something about them before he died. She's listening to learn if Grandma Carey ever mentions them."

"You told me the children were away safe," cried the old lady, anxiously.

"They are," I told her quickly. "The post-card Sammy Rail got proves it. This idea of Red's is just something he made up."

"Yes," Red waggled, at sea, "it's just my own idea. I suppose I'm all hay-wire—I usually am. But if I didn't know about that post-card I'd have the police out there in a second."

Horse Foot called me up at nine-thirty to tell me that he had uncovered another clue at the stone house. This time the parrot woman had pumped *two* pails of water together, thus making the clue twice as good as the other one. But when I tried to caution him to keep away from there and quit his nonsense, he sprung that crazy "P-p-pickled pigs feet" gag on me and hung up.

Now I'll tell you what Red and I found in the other chair seat!

CHAPTER XII

TRAPPED

WHAT day is this, Jerry?" Red asked, when we woke up the following morning.

"Friday," I yawned.

"Then to-morrow's Saturday."

"It should be," I agreed, "if somebody hasn't been fooling with the calendar behind our back."

"Let's give Piledriver a bath to-morrow," he suggested.

"In your ma's bathtub?" I laughed.

"No, up in our lodge room. We can heat some water in the wash-tub and give him a swell bath."

"I hate to talk about him behind his back," I spoke reluctantly, "but I've had a lurking suspicion for some time that a bath wouldn't hurt him any."

"Ma calls him Limburger," laughed Red.

"He isn't that bad, but you know when he's around."

"He's a swell goat," Red defended loyally.

"You may not be so enthusiastic about him,'" I laughed, "if he puts you and the wash-tub through the side of the barn."

"Him? Listen, boy, he loves me. He'd never turn on me that way."

"But you can't get him all in the wash-tub at once, unless you fold him up like an accordion."

"We'll put his front feet in first and wash that half and then do the same with the rear half."

"He's almost due for another bunting practice too, isn't he?" I asked.

"For spies?—yes, we'll give him another lesson after his bath. He'll be nice and peppy then."

"We've got another job too—we mustn't forget about that."

"What?"

"Investigating the chair seat."

"Oh, *that?*" Red yawned indifferently. "That can wait, for we'll probably just have our work for nothing anyway."

"Let's do it this noon," I suggested.

"I always give Piledriver a brushing at noon, after I feed him."

"If we wash him to-morrow he won't need brushing to-day."

"Well," Red yawned again, "you can come over after dinner and we'll see."

Mother had a couple of unexpected jobs for me that noon so Red and I didn't get a chance to go into the chair seat till that night after school.

"Let's get it over with as soon as we can," said Red, as I set to work on the upholstering tacks with a thin-edged screwdriver, "I want to take Piledriver out and exercise him."

"Boy, that one came out plenty easy," I spoke of the first loosened tack.

"Well, don't waste time talking about it—hurry up."

"Say!" I began to get excited. "Did you see how easy that next one came out?"

"So much the better—we'll get it over with quicker."

"But don't you catch on, Red? *They've been out before!*"

"You mean—"

"Not so very long ago either. They've been taken out carefully and then put back. Red, we're going to find something this trip!"

"Paper money, huh?" his own excitement grew.

"I hope so."

But what we found in the chair seat, after

the cloth had been loosened, wasn't greenbacks as we had hoped but a legal-looking paper with cramped writing on it.

"What is it?" Red asked, as I tremblingly took the paper out, my heart thumping like sixty.

"It's a will," I told him, after a quick glance at it. "It begins: 'The last will and testament of William Thorburton.' "

"What else? Does he say anything about the money in his stove?"

"No. But here's the name of his youngest sister."

"Alameda?"

"Yes. He has willed her everything he had, instead of the older sister."

"The sister Alameda is dead."

"It says: 'In the event of the death of my sister, Alameda, I hereby will and bequeath my entire worldly possessions, both money and goods, with all property, chattels and mortgages held in my name, to my sister's two children, Annie and Joe Kramer, to be properly held in trust for them till the youngest has reached the age of twenty-one, at which time the property, with all accumulated interest, profits and benefits, shall be divided equally between them.' "

"He must have known the orphans were around here," said Red.

"No—he was dead and buried before they got here. But evidently he knew *of* them."

Red snorted.

"And *you* wanted me to give the hidden money to that old witch!"

"I didn't want you to, Red—but I thought then it was the right thing to do. Boy, I'm glad this will came to light! It'll mean a lot to Annie and Joe. They won't ever have to go hungry again."

"What'll we do with the will, Jerry?—hide it with the money till we get track of the orphans?"

"I suppose we ought to turn it over to a lawyer."

"Do you suppose the parrot woman has a will of his too?"

"She probably forced him to sign one in her favor. But it won't do her any good if it's older than this one—for the last will made is always the legal one. This one is only a little more than a year old."

"This is the dying man's secret!" Red looked big-eyed at the will. "He wanted to tell Grandma Carey about it, so his younger sister's children would get his property and not

his scheming older sister, but she always stopped him."

"If she knew there was a later will than hers," I studied that point, "it's queer she didn't search for it afterwards, to destroy it."

"Maybe she did search for it."

"But if he lived all the time in that one room, naturally she'd search everything there. She'd be stupid not to suspect the stuffed chair seats. I'm beginning to think, Red, it was something else she was scared of him telling. I don't think she knew anything at all about this will, or the two orphans either."

"Well, why puzzle about it, we've got the will. The thing to do now is to decide what lawyer to take it to, for safe handling."

"How about Lawyer Van Ness? He's Dad's lawyer."

"All right," Red waggled. "Let's go."

We met Grandma Carey down town buying stuff for supper, and finding the law office closed for the day we went home with her, Mother later calling me up to tell me that Horse Foot had left a note for me at the house.

"I'll stop and get it to-morrow morning," I told her unconcerned.

"But he wanted me to call you up and tell you about it right away."

"Why didn't he call me up himself, instead of writing me a note," I growled.

"He came tearing in here a few minutes ago to get you to go some place with him, and when he found you weren't here he scribbled this note for you."

"Where was he going?"

"He wouldn't tell me."

"The crazy egg! I wonder what he's up to anyway. But you can read the note to me, if you want to."

"I can't read it, Jerry—the words don't make sense."

"Then throw it in the fire," I growled. "It's probably just some more of his crazy nonsense anyway."

"The first word is e-i-n-n-a," Mother spelt.

"That isn't a word."

"Well, that's what it is—e-i-n-n-a. The next word is d-n-a."

Red was listening at my elbow.

"That's 'and' turned around," he told me.

"What's that first word again?" I asked Mother quickly, for once before Horse Foot had written me an important note with the words all turned around.

"E-i-n-n-a," she spelt.

"That's 'Annie,'" Red spoke breathlessly.

"Get a paper and pencil," I told him quickly.

"Shall I throw the note away?" Mother asked.

"No, wait a minute—we're going to take it down."

Here are the words as Mother spelt them out to us:

Einna dna eoj deen pleh taem em ta eht
enots esuoh.

Here they are turned around:

Annie and joe need help meat me at the
stone house.

"I told you so!" cried Red, his eyes almost popping out of his face. "Those kids never got away safe at all. They're locked up in that big house, and that post-card was just a fake, to mislead us."

Bundling Grandma Carey off safely to the picture show, with the promise to pick her up again at ten-thirty, we hurried with a flashlight down the snow-packed river road and off to the east, the eerie stone house coming finally into sight ahead of us.

There was a dim yellow light in one of the ground-floor rooms on the east side, but the window was too high up for us to see into. I tried putting Red on my shoulders to peep in but we stumbled around so much and made so

much noise we finally gave it up, it having been our intention, if we *had* seen the trussed-up orphans in there, to get back to town as fast as our legs could carry us to sound the alarm.

Red himself was still dead sure that the orphans were there, and had wanted me to tell the police on our way through town. I had put him off till we had more tangible proof—for his own belief was just a suspicious notion, as he had to admit, and Horse Foot wasn't to be depended on too much—not after what he had told me about those water pails! It could have been that he had seen a curtain fluttering, jumping to the exciting conclusion that it was Annie waving her petticoat to him for help. I had come to find him and help him in every way I could—I couldn't very well do otherwise—but I was still skeptical of the outcome or the need of the trip.

We had expected to find Horse Foot waiting secretly in front, but had seen no sign of him there, nor had we picked up any trace of him when the Tutter tower clock distantly donged eight. Could it be, I began to worry, that the orphans were indeed held here and that the parrot woman had picked him up too? I excitedly talked it over with Red in the bushes, the two of us agreeing daringly to break into

the house if the parrot woman went off to town again as she had the two previous nights. The trip into town and back would take her two hours at least, which would give us plenty of time to search the house and learn its possible secrets.

Shortly after eight we caught sight of a light in one of the topmost windows—or was it the reflection of a shooting star? We had seen it for just an instant—then it was gone. It could have been a signal of some kind, we agreed. Our hearts thumping now, we watched the window steadily for fully ten minutes, with no sign of the light again. Then the lower light went out, throwing the whole vast house into total darkness.

“What'll we do now?” Red shivered, the cold getting him.

I was cold too—my feet were cold from standing in the snow and the wind was getting into my coat.

“Horse Foot may be safe at home, so suppose we go home ourselves and find out,” I suggested. “I don't think the parrot woman is going out to-night anyway.”

Red suddenly pulled me into the bushes.

“Keep your light out, Jerry,” he breathed excitedly.

"What's the matter?" I gurgled.

"I just saw her."

"Where?"

"There she goes—down the road. See her?"

"I can see somebody," I peered.

"She came out the back door. I happened to be glancing that way just in time to see her go round the corner."

We waited for what we figured was at least ten minutes, then went stealthily across through the growing moonlight to the back door, the house so big-looking even at a distance looking now like a great towering mass of masonry.

"Locked," I told Red, trying the door.

"I expected that." He dropped to the porch floor, feeling around.

"Shall we pry open a window?" I asked.

"Wait a minute—maybe she left the key here under this mat. Yes, here it is, Jerry," he announced gleefully.

"How did you happen to think of looking there?" I asked, as he turned the key in the door and opened it.

"That is where ma usually hides her door key—or in the mail-box. There wasn't any mail-box so I took the other place, figuring maybe women could be that much alike."

Inside, he unlatched and raised a window giv-

ing on the back porch, putting the key of the locked door back under the mat and coming in again through the window which too was then closed and relatched.

"She might come back unexpectedly," he said in explanation of his work, "so that's the safest plan."

We were in a great gaunt kitchen, stripped of everything but a huge rusted range and built-in cupboards, across the dusty floor of which a trail led to a door giving into a long dark hall with rooms opening on both sides. At the front there was a beautifully paneled vestibule, or at least it must have been very beautiful once upon a time though it was a mess of dust and cobwebs now. Off the vestibule was an office and beyond that what probably had been a large dining room.

Halfway across the dining room we were stopped by the parrot which swooped in and down on us, screeching: "Pigs! Pigs! Out with you! Out with you!"

I batted it down with my flashlight when it flew at us again, fearful it would gouge our eyes out with its snapping beak, but it was up again and off, the empty building echoing with its enraged shrieks, before I could grab it.

We found the room the man had died in, for

it hadn't that completely abandoned look that the other rooms had though it too had been stripped, and on the other side we found the room of the parrot woman herself. She had left her door ajar, for the parrot's convenience I suppose, but after one searching glance in we went on for there was nothing there, nor was there any signs of Horse Foot or the orphans in any of the second-floor rooms, mostly small guest chambers but now bare and deserted.

Our hopes that we would find something on the topmost floor were kept alive by the footprints on the dusty stairs. So on the third floor, instead of looking into all the rooms as on the floor below, we kept right on where the footprints led, coming to the locked door at the head of the final flight of stairs.

Red listened at the door.

"Hear anything?" I asked, when he straightened.

"No," he replied shortly.

I listened then.

"You hear anything, Jerry?" he asked.

"I thought I did," I spoke uncertainly.

"What?"

"Put your ear here by the crack and listen close."

"It's a moan," he said presently.

"That's what I thought too."

"Jerry," he spoke with a look on his face I never had seen there before, "there's someone in there."

"It must be the orphans."

"Yes—and maybe Horse Foot too."

"Hello!" I pounded on the door. "Are you in there, Horse Foot?"

The unmistakable moan became louder then, and finally faintly: "Help! Help!"

It was a big heavy door—it would have taken us some time to break it down, and afraid that the parrot woman might surprise us before we could finish the job if we started it, we started back down the stairs to get out and get help, but stopped dead in our tracks, trapped ourselves, as a door banged below.

The parrot woman was back!

CHAPTER XIII

THE PARROT WOMAN

“Oh, oh!” gurgled Red, dousing the light and clutching my hand in the dark. “We’re in for it now, Jerry.”

“She couldn’t have gone all the way to town,” I said, myself half scared out of my wits, for with the wicked house owner between us and the door out, and nothing for us to hide in but empty rooms in case she took after us, we were, I knew, in a blamed bad fix. It was one to make any pair of boys quake in their shoes, and bu-lieve me I was quaking *plenty*.

“Something turned her back,” Red whispered further in the dark, still hanging to me.

“Do you suppose she heard the parrot screeching at us?”

“Oh, no!—she was away down the road then. She couldn’t have heard that.”

“She could have heard me pounding on the door,” I further quaked, “for that was just a few minutes ago. She must have been right outside then.”

We tiptoed on down till we came to the last flight of stairs, standing back and listening then as the parrot woman, after locking herself in, came along the hall to her room, the parrot flying to meet her.

"Pigs! Pigs!" it lit shrieking on her shoulder. "Look under the bed! Pigs! Pigs!"

Red drew me back.

"Jerry, do you remember any trees close enough to the second-story windows for us to climb into?" he asked anxiously.

"No," I shook my head.

"Boy, I wish we could get out of here! Even if she didn't hear you pounding on the door, that blamed parrot is liable to give us away. Listen to it screeching down there!"

The woman had stopped just below.

"What's the matter, Beelzebub?" she asked, her cooing, rasping voice coming up to us plainly. "Tell mamma! Did Beelzebub hear a noise? Was Beelzebub frightened?"

"Pigs! Pigs!" the parrot shrieked with renewed fury. "Look under the bed."

"Beelzebub?" Red repeated the name in my ear. "That's a good name for it all right."

"What does it mean?" I asked him.

"A devil of some kind, I think."

The woman listened up the stairs, then evi-

dently satisfied that the parrot had let itself become alarmed needlessly, went on into her room, closing the door behind her.

"Boy, is *that* a relief!" gurgled Red weakly.

"Evidently she didn't hear me after all," I spoke with the same relief.

"It would seem not, or she would have been up here sure."

"If only that crazy parrot would shut up!" I spoke anxiously, as the furious bird kept up its tirade, muffled now by the closed door.

"Pigs! Pigs!" it shrieked. "Look under the bed, you old fool! Pigs! Pigs!"

Evidently it didn't usually act this way for the woman finally came back into the hall, going its length stealthily and listening suspiciously especially at the foot of the stairs, the two of us above scared out of our wits. There would be no escaping her if she came up or no telling what she would do to us if she caught us there. In her house that way, she could even shoot us down, with the later defense that she mistook us for robbers.

"There can't be anyone here," she muttered skeptically to herself, standing uncertainly at the foot of the stairs, "for the door was locked just as I left it. Yet something told me I should come back! What was it, Beelzebub? Tell

mamma nice now. Was it someone at the door?"

"Pigs! Pigs!" the parrot shrieked in reply.

Had it flown up to us then it probably would have brought her after it, but luckily for us it didn't, and concluding finally, as before, that the ruffled bird was stirred up over some trivial outside sound, she went back into her room, this time scolding the bird into grumbling silence.

"That was the luckiest escape we ever had," Red shivered.

"Yes, I thought sure she would come up," I shivered back, cold drops on my forehead. "We would have been goners if she had."

"What will we do now, Jerry?—wait till she goes to sleep and slip out?"

"That's the only safe thing we can do," I told him. "I hate to keep those poor kids penned up any longer, and Horse Foot with them, but I guess they'll have to stand it till we can get safely out ourselves."

"They must be all tied up, or they would have come to the door when you pounded on it, Horse Foot especially."

"I think they're all gagged too—from the sound of those muffled moans and that final cry for help. I could hardly make it out myself. But I think it was the girl. It sounded more like a girl."

"I thought it was only in fairy tales that evil witches locked up children," said Red. "Boy, I bet the law does plenty to that old wretch for this. It's kidnapping, and nothing else. They hang people for that."

"The orphans being her relatives," I said, "she may try to trump up some kind of an excuse for her act, saying that they first had tried to bump her off, or something. So the law may not hang her. Like you though, I think the law will give her plenty. Anyway I hope so."

"Yes," said Red, "and I hope she starts snoozing pretty quick so we can get out of here. On top of the danger, I'm getting cold. Br-r-r! It's like an ice-box in here."

"It's nervousness," I told him, shivering myself. "I feel the same way."

After what seemed an hour to us, and with everything quiet below now, we tiptoed down the stairs and along the hall to the kitchen, our light muffled in a handkerchief.

"I can hear her snoring," Red stopped for an instant with his ear to the parrot woman's closed door.

"Go on," I told him, prodding him, my heart in my throat.

"Hear her, Jerry?" he further whispered, listening.

"It's the parrot," I told him. "Go on, and let's get out of here while we've got the chance. Don't stop here."

"We're just as good as out already," he spoke confidently.

Bang!

It was his big feet colliding with an empty pail in the hall.

We ran for the back door then.

"Hurry!" I told Red, at the door, almost on top of him.

"The key isn't here, Jerry!" he gasped. "She's got it with her."

"Then to the window," I told him, dashing to it.

We could hear her coming, the parrot shrieking again, but still hoped to get away. The window was unlatched now and partly up. But before he could get it clear up, and get out, she got in on us, tall and gaunt as described, with the hair and jagged teeth of an old witch, her right hand gripping a revolver, a smoking kerosene lamp held shakily in the other.

"Come away from that window or I'll shoot!" she rasped.

If the window had been open we could have tumbled out, even at the risk of a shot. But we had no chance as it was. She had us trapped.

"Don't shoot!" I begged, when I got my voice back, facing her, hands up.

She came to within a few feet of us, more hideous than ever with her bared, tusklike teeth and glittering, probing eyes.

"How did you boys get in here?" she demanded to know, her voice coming up out of her throat with the gruffness of a man.

I told her.

"Spies, eh?" her coarse upper lip curled up. She came a step nearer. "Were you upstairs?"

"Yes," I further told her, feeling that any attempt at concealment or evasion would only make matters worse for us.

"Who are you?" she then demanded.

I told her that too.

"We're pals of the other boy," I added.

"What other boy?" she asked quickly.

Red gave me a kick.

"He means the little orphan boy upstairs," he spoke for me.

I saw then why Red in his quick way had cut in. He didn't want me to mention Horse Foot, who evidently wasn't imprisoned upstairs after all, and who might help us.

"Did you hear anything upstairs?" the woman next asked.

"Yes," Red did the speaking now.

"What?" she demanded shortly, her mouth set hard.

He told her.

"Who told you boys the brats were here?—that Carey woman?"

"No—we just figured it out for ourselves," replied Red.

"You're lying!—she told you and you're trying to shield her. I knew she knew! My brother told her they were coming. I should have silenced her the other night before you boys got there—for I remember you now! I saw you through the window. *She* told you. That's how you found out. Your lying doesn't deceive me."

"She told us something," Red admitted.

"Did she send you here?"

"No."

"Does she know you're here?"

"No."

Which was the truth too, for not wanting to alarm the old lady we had simply told her we would pick her up after the second show.

"Do your parents know you're here?"

"No."

"Or the police?"

"No."

I saw now from the woman's glittering eyes that she wasn't only vicious but crazy as well,

and hoping that Horse Foot somehow would get us out of there before her craziness carried her too far, I went ahead of her with Red up the stairs and into the final room at the top. There she made us tie our own ankles tightly with ropes and then herself tied our hands behind us, further gagging us with our own handkerchiefs and finally tying us together to a roof column in the middle of what had once been a beautiful ballroom, the scene probably of many happy gatherings, but now, like the rest of the house, a place abandoned to dust and decay.

There she left us in the dark and cold, the other unfortunate prisoners held in the same way to another column a short distance away. We had seen them, a pitiful huddle, when we came in and now further heard their muffled moans.

CHAPTER XIV

'AN EXCITING ESCAPE

I got Red's hands, guiding him to my pants pocket. I had a knife there, and if he could get it out, and get it open, we could quickly free ourselves and probably get safely away. He grasped quickly what I wanted, and tried hard to get the knife out, unable though to quite reach it.

I began chewing on my gag then, getting it enough aside to mumble comprehensively.

"Rip my pants," I told Red, twisting my body around to help all I could. It was torture for me—it seemed as though I were twisting everything inside of me out of shape—but I stood it as it was our only immediate chance. And finally—oh, golly, was I glad!—he got a hole ripped and got my knife out.

Then came the job of opening it. He tried and tried, but just couldn't. I couldn't either alone. But with me holding it and him digging at the blades we finally got it open.

The rest of course was easy.

Our own bonds and gags cut we got across quickly and cut the others'.

"How are you?" I asked the girl anxiously.

"Water," she gasped.

"Is there any up here?" I asked.

"Over there," she pointed.

We had dropped our flashlight in the kitchen, but there was enough moonlight filtering in for me to make out a water jug by the door, and getting it I held it while first the girl and then her brother drank deeply.

"Do you feel better now?" I asked her.

"Yes," she told me faintly. "But please rub Joe's legs—he's terribly cold."

The poor little kid!

Red and I rubbed on him steadily for at least fifteen minutes.

"We're friends of Sammy Rail," I told the girl, as we worked on her brother.

"Did he get my post-card?"

"Yes, but why did you write it and make us think you had gone safely away when you hadn't? Did the old woman make you?"

"Yes—she knew I told Sammy a few things about ourselves at the river, and afraid he might start a search for us, she made me write the card. But I pricked it with a pin when she wasn't watching, hoping he'd notice."

"Pricked it with a pin—how?" I asked eagerly.

"I spelt out 'help' twice with pin pricks under the letters."

"When we first came here to-night we thought he was shut up here too," I told her.

"No," she shook her head.

"He wrote a note to me to-night telling me to meet him here. He said in the note that you and Joe needed help, so he must have found your pin pricks finally—though none of us noticed them at first. I wonder what became of him. Can you imagine, Red?"

"No, but it's a lucky thing we didn't meet him here and bring him in with us. Now he can get us out—if he uses a little sense."

"Are you Red Meyers?" the girl asked Red shyly.

"Yes," he admitted.

"I'm Jerry Todd," I told her.

"I thought you were. Sammy told me all about you."

"He had ten dollars for you, but when we went down to the river to give it to you we couldn't find you."

"Mother warned us before she died never to come here. She told us what an evil woman our aunt was, but we couldn't make ourselves be-

lieve that any woman *could* be so wicked. Surely, we thought, she'd at least give us a home—and we were *so* desperate! Yet after we got here we were afraid to go to her. We did finally. You can see what happened to us!"

"Has she been feeding you?"

"A little. The cold was the worst."

"How are you now?" I asked the boy.

"Swell," he told me. He even grinned at me in the moonlight! But it was a wan pitiful little grin.

"Do your legs feel warmer now?"

"Sure. I'm all right."

"What is your opinion of your aunt?" I turned again to the girl. "Do you think she's crazy?"

"Oh, she must be, to imprison us and mistreat us this way! It can't all be inhumanity. She always had crazy spells, our mother told us."

"She looks crazy to me," put in Red.

"And what did you think when you first heard us at the door?" I further asked the girl.

"Oh, I was so glad!—and then the terrible despair when she brought you in! I gave up then."

"She caught us getting out," I explained.
"Red here had to stop and get funny."

"Gosh, I didn't mean to kick that pail," he growled.

"You shouldn't have stopped there in the first place. I told you not to, but you're always doing some crazy thing like that."

"Doesn't he jaw beautifully?" Red turned impishly to the girl. He'll make someone a swell nagging husband some day."

We all got together in one of the moonlit windows and watched for some signs of Horse Foot below, the moon getting higher till finally very little of its light touched the floor at all.

"Pigs! Pigs!" the parrot's hateful shriek came to us again through the locked door.

"She's coming back!" gasped the girl, frantically clutching my arm. "Oh, don't let her in, Jerry. Please! She may have come back to kill us all."

Red and I had fished a couple of stout sticks out of the rubbish there for just such an emergency as this, and getting on opposite sides of the door now we landed on the woman when she came in with every bit of strength we had.

She went down like a log, the parrot with her.

Almost at the same instant a door crashed below, followed by a babel of men's voices, and up the stairs tore Bill Hadley, the Tutter marshal.

"Come this way, men," he boomed down to the force he had brought with him. "They're up here in the attic."

"It isn't an attic," I told Bill wanly, when he got clear up. "It's a ballroom."

"Are them the orphans?" He turned his flashlight on the frightened, huddled pair.

"Yes," I nodded. "But where's Horse Foot? Has anything happened to him?"

"He got smacked by an auto to-night an' woke up in the hospital, where he later told me what I thought was a crazy yarn about two orphan prisoners here. He knew what he was talkin' about though—gol-durned if he didn't! Humph! I always suspected the old gal here was dippy, but I never dreamed she'd do anything like this. It'll go hard with her."

"Red and I just knocked her out," I told him, as the gaunt figure on the floor began to stir.

"I figured you had," he grinned at me coarsely, "when I seed you standin' there with the club. Wa-al, we'll take her to the hospital an' sew up her skull if necessary. Reckon I better take the kids there too fur a spell. They don't look so good."

"But Horse Foot isn't hurt seriously, is he?" I asked, worried.

"*Him?*" snorted Bill, wriggling his big mouth in that funny way of his. "Oh, he jest got a banged collarbone, that's all. Luckily he got hit mostly on the head, an' it's plenty thick. The auto got smashed up worse than him."

CHAPTER XV.

MORE INITIATIONS

WE GOT back to town just in time to pick up Grandma Carey at the theatre, taking her home safely and telling her happily that her worries were over. The parrot woman had been taken to the Tutter hospital with two big bumps on her head and would go from there to prison with the charge of kidnapping against her. She never would get out of prison alive, we declared, for no matter how light her sentence might be, at her age she never could outlive it.

“Mercy me!” cried the old lady, her eyes swelling as she heard our full adventure. “Did she really point a revolver at you? Why, she might have shot you! And I got you into it! Oh, dear, dear!”

“No,” I grinned, “*you* didn’t get us into that, Grandma Carey. We got into that ourselves, wanting to help the orphans. It was risky, I know. But if necessary I’d do it all over again, and Red would too I bet—wouldn’t you, Red?” I appealed.

"Well," he grimaced, "I'd try not to kick that pail again, for that wasn't so smart."

"You've done nobly, boys," the old lady complimented us. "Your friends are all going to be proud of you for this. I'm going to let everybody know too how kind you were to stay here with me, though of course that won't be necessary any longer with the woman in custody. So you can sleep in your own beds to-night, if you wish."

"Oh, but we don't want to," Red told her quickly. "We want to get another crack at those swell pancakes of yours. Um! I wouldn't mind a flock of them myself right now."

The old lady promptly got up and started mixing stuff in a bowl.

"Well," she beamed at Red, "stir up the fire and put the griddle on."

"Oh, no, Grandma Carey!" I told her hastily. "You shouldn't bother to bake pancakes for him at this time of night. He was just talking. You ought to know him by this time."

"But I want some myself." She kept right on stirring. "I think we'll have some hot chocolate too. It may keep us all awake to-night, but after what you've just told me I don't think I could sleep anyway."

"To-morrow's Saturday," Red stepped

around happily, as the pancake stirring progressed. "So we should worry how much sleep we lose to-night."

Over the pancakes and chocolate we told Grandma Carey the rest—how Red had first found two hundred and sixteen dollars in the old stove and how later, acting on a hunch, we had found a final will of William Thorburton's in one of his chair seats, the will giving everything he had to his dead sister's children.

"Oh, isn't that nice!" beamed the happy old lady. "Oh, I'm so glad! I can't bear to hear of children suffering, or wandering homeless. I'm so glad they'll be taken care of now, with plenty. Are they nice children?"

"Yes," Red swung in, a pancake tail dangling from his big mouth, "Jerry's in love with the girl already."

I was too busy with a new idea that had just popped into my head to pay any attention to him.

"Say, Grandma Carey!" I spoke eagerly across the table. "I've got an idea!"

"Marvelous!" guzzled Red. "The first one in fourteen years. Business is picking up."

"Oh, pipe down—you!" I growled, kicking him under the table.

"What is it, Jerry?" the old lady smiled.

"Annie and Joe won't want to live alone in that big stone house, and I don't think anybody, knowing the history of the house, would care to live there with them. They'll have money now for what they need, so why don't you offer to board them here? I've heard you wish a hundred times that you had a couple of boys of your own, and you'll like Annie just as well as any boy. She's nice, and pretty too, with big brown eyes and curly brown hair. As for Joe—he's a trump. Honest, Grandma Carey, his legs to-night were almost like ice, but he never whimpered a mite. They could be so happy here, and it wouldn't be an expense to you either. It would be a help."

"And how handy for you," Red smirked across at me. "Our little planner!"

I gave him another kick under the table.

"Wait till I get you in bed to-night," I growled at him.

"I'm going to sleep with Grandma Carey," he laughed. "Can't I, Grandma Carey? You wouldn't want to see me massacred, would you?"

"You'll sleep right where you've always slept here," the old lady said flatly. "And if I hear any excessive racket up there, I'll come up with a paddle for the both of you."

"What do you think of my plan?" I asked her eagerly.

"You know, Jerry," she replied earnestly, "that I'd do anything in my power to help any homeless child. I'm willing myself of course. You mustn't forget though that the orphans themselves are the ones to finally decide."

"They'll be in the hospital for a day or two, as they're both pretty weak. But I'll tell Annie the first chance I get. I bet she'll jump at your offer too."

"Well," yawned Red, full now and ready for bed, "I hope she does. I'd hate to see her get away from you with that two hundred and sixteen dollars. Gr-r-r! I find it and you get it!—*Romeo!*"

Then, boy, I *did* give him a whacker under the table, keeping him howling for five minutes.

Mother called me up just before bedtime, Dad having picked up an earful of exciting news down town.

"Jerry," she asked anxiously, "are you all right?"

"Sure thing," I told her lightly.

Red as usual was listening at my elbow.

"Who is it?" he asked. "Your ma?"

"Yes—she wants to know if I'm all right."

"Was that you, Donald?" Mother asked.

"Yes, it's me," he replied. "Jerry's all right, Mrs. Todd, except for his head."

I pushed him away then.

"He's the one who should have his head examined," I told Mother.

"I heard you boys were shot at to-night by that terrible parrot woman," she went on anxiously. "Jerry, whatever possessed you to go down there without the police? If you knew those two children were prisoners there, why didn't you take the police with you?"

"We didn't know for sure that they were there till we got in. The woman didn't shoot at us, Mother. Someone made that up. It's all a lie."

"Well, your father heard she shot at you and then locked up the two of you in her attic."

"We were locked up for a few minutes," I admitted, trying to make light of it, "but she didn't shoot at us—honest she didn't, Mother. There was nothing in anything we did for you to worry about."

"Oh, no!" said Mother, all worked up. "It's nothing for me to worry about when you break into a crazy woman's house, with her chasing you around with a revolver and finally locking you up. Just a passing boyish incident! Well,

young man, I want to see you at home right after breakfast to-morrow morning. I'm going to have a talk with you. You may be another Sherlock Holmes to the boys and girls of America, but to me you're just a foolhardy boy. These silly detective notions of yours are going to stop right here."

"But we weren't detecting," I defended. "We were trying to save the orphans."

"That was a job for the police, not two boys like you and Donald Meyers. But I'll tell you more what I think about it to-morrow morning. Remember—right after breakfast! And don't leave any dirty clothes out there."

"What's the matter?" Red asked, when I hung up, scowling.

"Oh, Mother heard the crazy woman shot at us—and I'm due for an after-breakfast lecture to-morrow morning."

"Well, cheer up," Red grinned impishly, getting out of my way. "You and Annie will have a home of your own pretty soon—that is if Horse Foot doesn't cut you out."

Horse Foot!

"Gee!" I laughed, "I had forgotten all about him. Let's call up the hospital and see how he is."

We were told though, when we got the local

hospital on the line, that he was asleep, with nothing to worry about. He'd be back at home as well as ever in a day or two.

"And now," grinned Red, "shall we call up the garage and find out how the poor car is that smacked him on the head?"

"Don't be silly!" I grunted. "We should be glad he wasn't hurt any worse. He probably got that smack too right after he wrote me that note."

"Yes," figured Red, "he probably was tearing out there to be a hero without paying any attention to the passing cars."

I found Mother in bed with a cold the following morning, too stuffed up to say much. So I dutifully pitched into the housework, later calling on Horse Foot and the orphans in the hospital, stopping finally at the jail to get the latest news about the parrot woman, who had been patched up first in the hospital and then taken to a cell there.

The usual gang of loafers at the jail gathered around me when I came in to get my story, telling me in return that the parrot woman had already been declared insane by the doctors and committed to the state insane asylum, her recovered parrot with her. It was bad of course for anybody to land in a place like that, and

knowing that she was crazy now and therefore unaccountable for her cruel acts, I was hopeful that the doctors in the asylum would be able to do something for her to make her mind right again, so that before the end she could have at least a few happy years with the right kind of feeling toward people. I was further told that the law was going to take over her property, to hold in trust for the two orphans, and out at the stone house every possible effort was being made by a responsible searching committee to recover the money supposedly hidden there.

In separating from Red that morning I had given him the will, which he later turned over to his father together with the recovered stove money, it all ending in the hands of a trustworthy lawyer. The town of course almost talked itself dizzy over the combined events, the story getting out by night that the searching committee at the stone house had dug out of the cellar and poked out of cracks more than six thousand dollars. The search was to continue Monday, with a day-and-night guard stationed there, many in town believing that before the search ended Annie and Joe would have at least ten thousand dollars in cash to their credit, with the mineral spring property on top of it.

No wonder Annie met me with shining eyes

when I dropped in again on her that night. Boy, I told myself, she got prettier every minute! I had stopped to get Red to go down with me, but he was too stiff even to get out of the house. He was sitting on a pile of pillows when I got there, and when I accidentally let the door bang behind me he started up with a hunted look, his eyes popping out horrified. He thought it was Piledriver again I guess taking after him over the wash-tub, for that is where he got his stiffness. It seems that Piledriver didn't quite grasp the idea that Saturday around Tutter was the usual weekly bath day. Red got the front half washed, as planned, but after getting the goat turned around, to go after the rear half, he made the mistake of stooping over—and that is when Piledriver smacked him. Mrs. Meyers fluttered around, her own face a foot long, nudging me not to snicker—but you should have heard Mr. Meyers when *he* came in! I thought he'd bust—going finally up the stairs singing “In the shade of the old apple tree,” his wife frowning resentfully after him.

Red groaned till after Sunday-school was over the next day, then got out with me to have a snowball fight, but as it hurt him to bend over to make snowballs the fight didn't last long. Horse Foot, home already, watched us

from his bay window, crazy to get out with us, and the next day he *was* out with us again just as well as ever but a little bit stiff like Red.

I had told Annie about Grandma Carey, and Monday arrangements were completed for the orphans to live there, Annie calling me up from there that night to tell me happily about her new home and all the new clothes she and Joe had. He had been fitted for glasses too, and just as soon as the glasses were ready for him the two planned on starting to school.

Well, on Wednesday night we got our ladders out and went to lodge as usual, Peg riding the goat this time. That is, he was brought in astride the goat blindfolded, the goat's legs bowed out under him. We saw right off that the poor goat couldn't carry him far, overgrown ox that he was, so made him get off and follow beside the goat throughout the balance of his initiation. It was all a lot of fun as before, we didn't tire of it a bit, and afterwards talked enthusiastically of the next initiation.

Boys right and left were begging us to join, so we took down their names planning to take the pick of them and initiate them one at a time. When we got eight members (enough to fill all the offices) we planned to hold a regular election, but until then it was agreed that Red

and I should keep the inside offices we had started with, with Horse Foot in the Lookout Tower, Scoop managing the goat and Peg, with a change of voices, taking all the other parts—the two Robbers, the Black Imp and the Knight of the Gold Star.

We had offered Joe his goat back, but he had told us to keep him, hinting though that he would like to ride him himself. So we took him in next, and after him Annie herself, though until she began begging us to join we hadn't given any thought at all to initiating girls. In the first place we didn't think the girls we knew well enough to initiate would be willing to ride the goat. But Annie said *she'd* ride him—and how!—if we'd just take her in, and if he had learned any new bunting tricks since she and Joe had owned him, she'd risk that too, she said.

Thinking you'll enjoy her initiation, and its unexpected exciting climax, I'll tell you about it in my next chapter.

Poor Mr. Meyers! Oh, oh! I still laugh whenever I think of it. But here it is, just as it happened.

CHAPTER XVI

POOR MR. MEYERS!

WE WERE doing nearly all of our home-work up in the lodge room now as it was much more fun to study up there together than it was at home alone. Often there would be three or four of us grouped studiously around the glowing stove, one with a book and another with paper and pencil, with the strict rule that there wasn't to be any horse-play till the last fellow had completed his work, after which, I can tell you, there was *plenty* of horse-play!

We had fun now that we never had known before, because we never had had the right place before, and every day our gratitude to Mr. Meyers grew for his generous part in making the new fun possible.

Following that first swell meal, Red and I with the others cooked many more like it up there, getting to be quite expert at it and always neatly cleaning up afterwards as we had promised our mothers to do. On Saturday we hardly ever ate more than the first meal at

home. Two or three of us would volunteer to furnish and cook dinner, the rest doing the same for supper, each group trying to outdo the other.

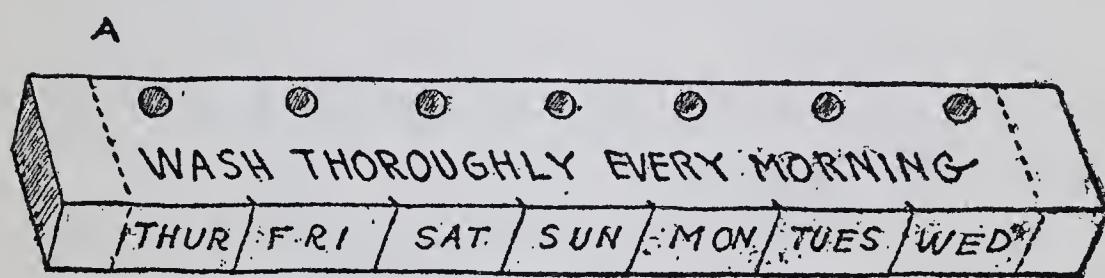
We started sleeping there too, but our parents cut us down to Friday night on that when they learned about the fun going on there and the jokes played back and forth. When there was school the next day we had to sleep at home, but on Friday night we made the old barn ring with our fun. We drew numbers, and when the barn got cold it was number one's job to get up and fix the fire. If the barn got cold again, number two had to get up to fire, and so on till morning. But unless it was particularly cold outside we usually slept through till day-break once we dropped off—for you know how boys are! Once asleep it takes a lot to arouse them.

Red and I had made the first four ladders ourselves but now had a regular "ladder hour" on Tuesday night, it being the duty then of every member present to help make ladder parts from the patterns provided. These patterns were accurately cut and marked for holes and lettering, so with a stock on hand it was possible now to put a ladder together in just a few minutes, though the first one (and not such

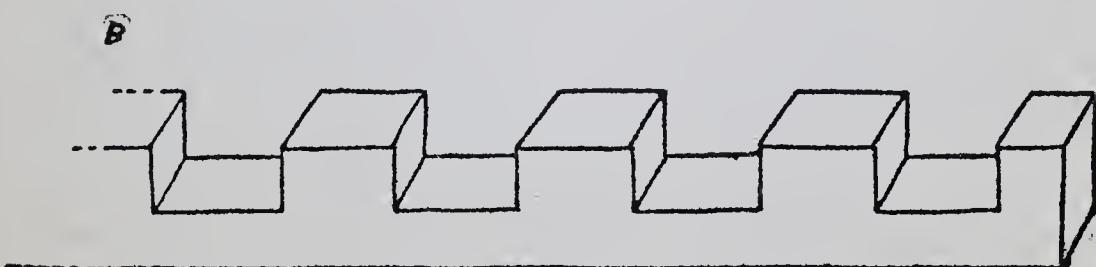
a good one either!) had taken us several hours to build.

Did you ever notice those little wooden pins that butchers use in pinning rib roasts together? Skewers is the right name for them, though you probably would call them lollipop sticks yourself. We used these cut up short and pointed for pegs, dipped proportionately into black and gold ink. The material for the other parts we bought in long strips from the lumber yard, at a cent a foot, doing the evenly-spaced drilling on a little machine of Mr. Meyers', the final lettering on the steps falling to me.

Here is one of the finished steps reproduced full size:



Here is a section of one of the side pieces reproduced full size:



Here is a completed ladder reproduced half-size.

Annie came in the night before her initiation almost catching me working on her ladder.

"I had to bring a note over this way from Grandma Carey, and noticing your light I thought I'd drop in on you for a few minutes," she explained the unexpected visit. "Or maybe," she added hesitatingly, her cheeks flushing, "you don't care to have girls run in on you this way."

"Oh, sure," Red told her, with an impish grin at me. "Jerry was just wishing you'd pop in, for he's making you something special. He's been handling it so tenderly. I bet he'll want to gold-plate it too."

The big egg!

"It's something I have to make for all new members," I told her.

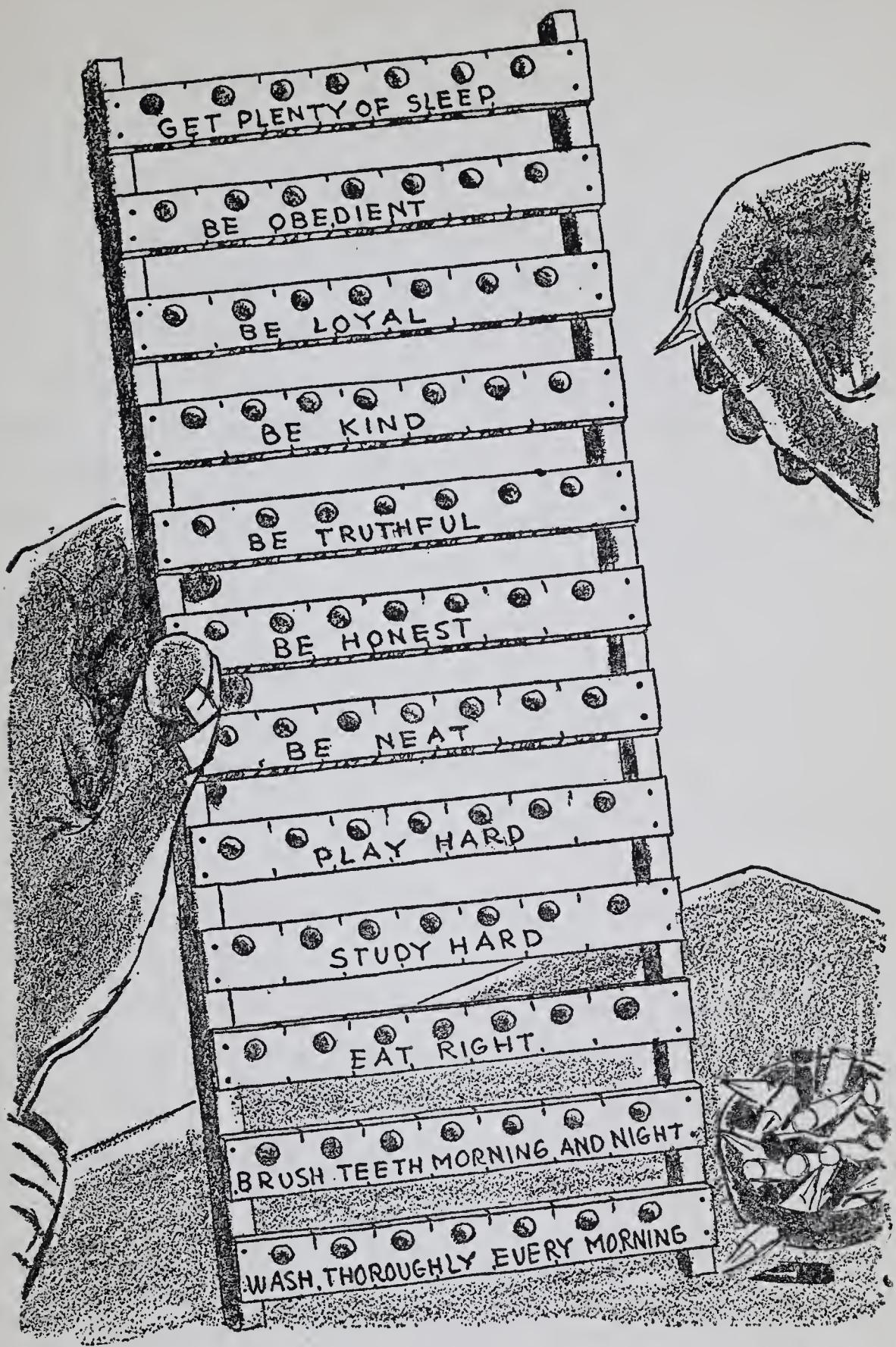
"I bet I know what it is," she guessed, her eyes dancing. "A little ladder like Joe's."

"You'll find out to-morrow night," I told her.

"Where do you keep the goat?" she looked around curiously.

"He's downstairs on a special red-pepper diet," Red told her.

"On a special red-pepper diet?" she repeated, puzzled.



THE MYSTIC LADDER IS PRESENTED TO THE NEW KNIGHT.

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"Yes, we always feed him up on red pepper just before an initiation, to pepper him up," Red told her crazily.

But it took more than that to intimidate her!

"I knew him before you did," she laughed confidently. "I'm not afraid of him."

"Where did you ever happen to get him?" I asked her curiously. "You've never told us."

Her face saddened.

"It's quite a long story, Jerry, and a not very happy one either, but some day I may tell you all about it."

"Yes," Red put in again, with that silly mushy look of his, "there shouldn't be any secrets between husband and wife."

That didn't fit with Annie any better than it did with me.

"Why don't you take him down, Jerry?" she egged, annoyed.

"That's a good idea," I told her grimly. And getting him down finally in a corner I gave him plenty, his squawks bringing his mother flying.

"Goodness me!" she told Annie, worried. "I thought from the racket that they had you on that goat already, for I saw you come in."

"Do you know what Donald just told me?" laughed Annie. "He said he's feeding the goat red pepper to pepper him up for to-morrow."

night, when I will be expected to ride him."

"Well, from what he did to Donald himself the other day when he tried to give him a bath," Mrs. Meyers spoke dryly, "I don't think he needs any red pepper. Goodness me! I wouldn't get on that vicious creature myself for all the lodge secrets in the world. I'm surprised you would either."

"I'm looking forward to it," Annie confessed.

There was nothing "sissified" about her, let me tell you. Boy, she could play baseball or climb trees with the best of us.

"Well," Mrs. Meyers spoke flatly, "you never would have gotten *me* on a goat when I was a girl, I can heartily assure you of that. I don't think it's the right thing for a nice little girl like you either, and I'll worry till it's over with. This racket to-night almost scared the wits out of me."

Annie looked around curiously, this being her first visit.

"Which of the boys did all the fancy painting, Mrs. Meyers? Do you know?"

"I think Jerry and Donald will have to plead guilty to that."

"Hey!" Red stiffened to his mother. "That's no way to talk about our swell castle."

"Is it supposed to be a castle?" Annie asked innocently, further looking around.

"Oh, are girls dumb!" squawked Red, clawing his hair.

"These squares on the wall," Mrs. Meyers then dryly indicated to Annie, "are supposed to be stones in a castle wall."

"I could make them look more like stones than that," Annie spoke confidently. "They need shading. That was one of the first things Mother taught me."

"Did your mother herself ever take painting lessons?" I asked.

"No, but if she had been given lessons she would have made a name for herself. Instead of helping her though and encouraging her, her family ridiculed her—that aunt of mine even tearing up her work in front of her."

She had spoken of her mother a number of times, but never of her father, and when I innocently asked her now if he had come from around Tutter too, she buttoned her coat collar tightly around her and hurried off, her eyes filled with tears.

Before closing up that night Red and I got the lodge room all ready for the coming initiation, even bringing up a double armful of wood. To our surprise this wood was half gone when

we ran up there the following afternoon after school to start the heat going.

Red peeked into the stove.

"And look at all the ashes, Jerry!" he growled.

"What do you make of it?" I asked, puzzled.

"Somebody was up here last night after we left."

"I thought you and I had the only two keys."

"That's what I thought too. But that wood didn't jump into the stove itself."

"Maybe we didn't leave as much wood up here as we thought," I told him. "Or maybe your pa got in somehow and took it."

"Took it?—what for?"

"To hurry up the furnace possibly. Dad often puts in wood to get a quick fire."

"Yes, but why should pa come clear up here for wood when there's a whole pile downstairs? I tell you, Jerry, someone slept here last night —possibly some old tramp—that's where our wood went to. I bet you our stove was going all night long."

I had invited Red over to my house for supper as it was Dad's birthday, so we were plenty full when we started back at seven-thirty.

The lodge-room lights were on when we got there, and thinking that the old tramp was in

there already we started angrily up the stairs to order him out, but stopped listening when we heard Mr. and Mrs. Meyers in there.

"What was it you wanted moved?" he asked her.

"That little yellow bureau," she replied. "I want you to push it farther back in the corner, if you can."

I looked at Red.

"Didn't you lock the lodge room when we left?" I asked him, as we stood quietly on the stairs.

"Sure I did."

"Then your pa *has* got a key just as I told you. That's where our wood went to."

"I can't imagine what he and ma are doing up there now. It looks suspicious to me. Let's listen a few minutes, Jerry."

So we went quietly to the top of the stairs, the voices inside getting plainer.

Mr. Meyers was poking around in one corner where we had hung a heavy red curtain in front of some old furniture that he had made us save when we were cleaning up the place.

"How's that?" he growled to his wife. "Is that where you wanted the dresser moved to?"

"Can't you move it back a little bit more?"

"It's clear back against the wall now."

"I thought there would be more room in there than that."

"I don't know yet what your idea was in getting me up here so secretly to move this old bureau around. The boys recognize your right to come in here whenever necessary. There was no need of slipping in when they were away."

"But, Charley, I'm going to stay here to-night till their lodge is over. That's why I came up secretly."

"Huh?"

"You needn't look so surprised," she said.
"My mind is made up and I'm going to do it."

"Oh, no! You wouldn't spy on the boys that way. That's no example to set them."

"I'm not doing it to spy on them."

"That's the way they'll take it. They'll resent it too."

"I'm doing it to help that little girl."

"What little girl?"

"That new Kramer girl. The boys are going to make her ride the goat to-night. I'm worried sick about it, Charley, for you know yourself what that goat is! What chance would the little girl have if he took after her like he did you the other night?"

"He wouldn't be likely to take after her, for she used to own him."

"How about Donald the other day?—when he took after him? He owned him."

"Listen, honey, you couldn't do any good up here anyway if the goat got going."

"You think I couldn't?" Mrs. Meyers spoke grittily. "Look at the club I've got. You'll find out what I can do if there's any trouble up here to-night. That little girl isn't going to be bunted around by that goat if I can help it."

"Now you've got *me* worried," grumbled Mr. Meyers. "If you ever did take a swing at that goat, heaven only knows what might happen to you. Why don't you be sensible and let the boys run their own lodge? Come on!—let's go in the house."

"Let me see if I can possibly wedge in there."

"I'll tell you before you try that you can't."

"Well, I know what I can do then."

"Listen, honey—" Mr. Meyers urged.

"I'll stand behind the curtain."

"Why don't you listen to me, honey?"

"Do I make the curtain stick out any, Charley?" she asked behind it.

"Plenty!" he growled.

She came out.

"You get behind it and let me see."

"Oh, rats!"

I got Red's ear.

"Let's go in," I whispered. "If your ma wants to stay up here during the initiation there's no need of her hiding."

"Let's wait," he giggled lightly. "If she does hide behind that curtain I'm going to have some fun with her."

"How?"

"Oh, just before we start lodge I'll say something about putting Piledriver back there—that'll bring her out in a hurry."

"I think we should go in and invite her to stay if she wants to. I don't think we should do anything to scare her."

"Pa probably won't let her stay anyway—but let's listen."

Scoop and Peg came in then talking and laughing.

"Quick!" said Mrs. Meyers inside. "Here they come. Let me in there."

"You'll never get in there," Mr. Meyers blocked her way grimly.

"Please, Charley—"

"I'll do it myself rather than risk anything happening to you, though I still can't see any sense in it."

"But, Charley, your stomach makes the curtain bulge out."

"I'll pull my stomach in. Go on in the house and take an aspirin. I think you need something like that."

We let Scoop and Peg go in ahead of us.

"Hi, Mrs. Meyers," Scoop greeted in his polite way. "Are you going to stay for the big initiation?"

"No," came the nervous reply, "I just came up to move some old furniture around. I think I'll go back in the house now."

I got Red's ear again.

"What are you going to do?" I asked him, before his mother got out.

"I don't know," he puzzled. "I hadn't figured on pa hiding there. But I guess we'll just let him stay there for a while and later on I'll go over and yank the curtain aside, or something."

Mrs. Meyers stopped inside the door for a final anxious look back.

"Your stomach's out too far!" she started singing, to the tune of "Farmer in the dell." "Your stomach's out too far! Pull it in and pull it in! Your stomach's out too far!"

We could imagine how surprised Scoop and Peg were to hear her suddenly let out like that in her high soprano.

"I never heard those words before, Mrs. Meyers," Scoop told her.

"I made them up myself," she told him.

Red and I went in then.

"Hi, ma," he greeted. "Was that you warbling?"

"I was just singing a little song of my own—for a purpose."

Yes, and we knew what that purpose was, but we never let on!

"What made your ma act so queer?" Scoop asked Red, when Mrs. Meyers had gone.

"Did she act queer?" Red asked innocently, trying to keep his dancing eyes away from the moving curtain—for every time Mr. Meyers breathed the curtain went in and out.

"She looked kind of wild-eyed when Peg and I first came in. Then all of a sudden she started singing: 'Your stomach's out too far! Your stomach's out too far! Pull it in and pull it in! Your stomach's out too far!'"

"Yes, I heard her," laughed Red. "She probably was just practicing something she's going to sing in the choir next Sunday."

Scoop scratched his head.

"The congregation will think she's cuckoo," he muttered, "if she sings that."

"She'll have different words then. But let's get going, for I can hear Annie and Joe downstairs. There comes Horse Foot too."

The red curtain was still going in and out with each breath of Mr. Meyers' when we took our proper stations in our fancy robes and opened up, the candidate waiting as usual at the foot of the stairs.

"Brother Keeper of the K-k-keys," Horse Foot addressed Red from the Lookout Tower, when we came to that part. "There approaches a—a—"

"A lone wayfarer," prompted Red, as Horse Foot lost his line.

"There approaches a l-l-lone wayfarer," Horse Foot got it right that time.

"You will further keep informed on his movements while I report to our leader," Red spoke his own lines with a big air.

"Hey!" Horse Foot hissed down, almost tipping the Lookout Tower over.

"What's the matter with you?" Red hissed back.

"It isn't a h-h-him—it's a her."

"Well, I know that, you egg!"

"You said h-h-him."

"Oh, shut up. And quit leaning over that way, or you'll trip your tower over and break your neck."

Everything went along all right till we got Annie in and on the Carpet of Truth for her

obligation. Piledriver had been eyeing the curtain every time he passed it, smelling something in there that he figured didn't belong there. Red hadn't made any move yet to pull the curtain aside, and hoping that the goat wouldn't suddenly make a lunge for there, I hurried Annie along.

"I further promise and swear—" I gave her the line.

"I further promise and swear—" she repeated.

"—to attend lodge regularly—"

"—to attend lodge regularly—"

"—and execute faithfully—"

"—and execute faithfully—"

Scoop, with the goat, came in then.

"He's trying to pull away from me, Jerry."

"Hang onto him."

"Baa! Baa!" Piledriver showed his temper, pawing.

"Keep him quiet," I told Scoop.

"I can't. He's pulling away from me, Jerry. There he goes!"

Mr. Meyers heard Piledriver coming and knowing what to expect tried to get away from him, the rest of us tumbling excitedly out of our stations and trying to grab him.

Around and around the room Mr. Meyers

tore pop-eyed, the goat hot after him and us tumbling after the goat, first one of us lunging unsuccessfully for him and then another, Annie herself having sensibly climbed on a chair out of harm's way.

You never heard so much yelling in all your life, Mr. Meyers himself yelling for us to open the door so he could get out and us yelling to the goat to stop. Mrs. Meyers, hearing the uproar and fearing the worst, came flying up, Mr. Meyers and the goat tearing past her the minute the door opened. Out of the barn they tore and around the house.

The goat was too close for Mr. Meyers to get up the apple tree this time, but by a quick leap through a rose bush he did finally get up on a porch column out of the goat's reach, Mrs. Meyers putting in the next two hours pulling rose briars out of him. We could finish Annie's initiation, he told us from behind the screen where Mrs. Meyers was working on him with a pair of tweezers, but this was the end.

The next day Piledriver had to go!

CHAPTER XVII

ANNIE'S CONFESSION

ANNIE came to me with her ladder after the initiation. She looked troubled.

"I almost wish I hadn't joined," she told me, long-faced.

"Why?" I asked, surprised.

The initiation, I thought, had been perfect—except for the part where Mr. Meyers got it. I couldn't imagine what had prompted her to say that. She had been so eager to join too!

"Didn't you like the initiation?" I asked her further.

"Yes," she spoke slowly, "but it was almost too real, Jerry."

"Too real—how?"

"You made me feel that you were indeed a group of splendid manly knights, and that to be worthy of joining you I should be exactly like you. I'm afraid I can't, Jerry. There's one step in the ladder I'll have to skip—or—or tell the truth."

I didn't know what to say to that. I just

stood there and looked at her, quite puzzled.

"It's about my father," she added. "You asked me last night if he came from around here, like my mother, and probably you noticed then that I almost burst into tears. I—I never told you the truth about him, Jerry. I was ashamed to tell you."

"It's none of my business anyway," I told her.

"But unless I correct the story I told you, I'll always be a liar. I'll always have black pegs in that step. I won't be any credit to your lodge. Of course I knew there would be a step like that in my own ladder—for I saw Joe's ladder. I didn't realize though how real your initiation would be, and how it would affect me. Shall I drop out, Jerry?"

"It isn't for me to decide," I told her. "I'm just one of the members."

"You've been awfully nice to me, Jerry," she spoke earnestly.

"You've had a hard time of it and I'm glad to have had the chance of doing something for you. But I haven't done any more than the others. You owe the most to Horse Foot."

"When do you have your next lodge meeting?" she asked.

"Next Wednesday night. You better come

too," I urged, "for I don't think that what you've been holding back is so terribly important."

"Yes, I'll come," she promised. "I'll know then what I want to do."

Red was working over Piledriver on the Carpet of Truth.

"What's the matter with him?" I asked, when the others had gone.

"He's got the hiccups," said Red.

"Oop!" convulsively hiccupped the goat.

"Give him some water," I suggested.

"I've already given him a gallon," said Red. "I'm beginning to think that maybe I've given him too much. Did you notice how he rattled inside then?"

"Maybe he swallowed a rattlebox," I grinned.

"Rattlebox, your granny! It was the water you heard gurgling."

"Oop!" hiccupped the goat again.

"Did you hear that then?" Red asked.

"Yes, it sounded gurgly all right," I nodded.

"Maybe we ought to pump him out," Red considered.

"Don't be crazy!—we couldn't pump him out."

"A doctor could."

The goat drew himself up into a knot.

"OOP!" came a violent hiccup, as he unsnapped.

"Maybe we better get our rain-coats—in case he blows up," I suggested.

Red looked daggers.

"This isn't any time to get funny," he growled.

"Hiccups aren't serious," I told him.

"Yes, but look how glassy his eyes are, Jerry! Do you suppose he's dying?"

Mrs. Meyers came in then.

"Do you boys realize it's after ten o'clock?" she said sharply. "You should both be in bed. So hurry now and close up."

"Come here, ma," Red called her over.
"Look at Piledriver!—he's sick."

"Oop!" hiccupped the goat.

"Look how glassy his eyes are, ma."

"What happened to him?"

"He was all right after the initiation. Then he started hiccupping."

"I thought you'd give him back to that little Kramer boy to-night."

"Oh, ma—" Red began to whine.

"You heard what your father said," Mrs. Meyers cut in sharply. "The goat has got to

go, and that's final. I don't want any more coaxing about it either. He's got to be out of here by to-morrow noon. Those are your father's final orders."

"But, ma," Red argued, "we can't move him if he's sick. Look at him! Can I sleep with him to-night and take care of him? Please! I think he ought to have a hot-water bottle on him."

Mrs. Meyers threw up her hands.

"Oh, dear! One patient in the house with mercurochrome spots all over him and another out here with the hiccups. You'd think it was a hospital of some kind. Yes, sleep with him if you must—I'll give in to you that much—but to-night is the last. Let there be no misunderstanding about that."

"How about you, Jerry?" Red asked me eagerly, when his mother had gone. "Can you stay too?"

I coaxed Mother to let me, when I got home, but she made me stay where I was, so I didn't get to see the patient again until the following morning.

"How is he?" I asked Red, tumbling into the lodge room, where the goat was getting a special breakfast of bread and milk.

"He hiccupped the most of the night," Red

told me. "He's all right now though. I think I know what brought it on, Jerry."

"What?" I asked.

"He doesn't want to leave me. Look at the way he looks at me!"

"He does look kind of mournful," I admitted.

"He knows that they're all mad at him but us, and that he's going to get kicked out. That's why he got sick."

"I'd sooner think he swallowed a piece of your pa's coat-tail and got sick on that," I laughed. "But how is your pa to-day?"

"Br-r-r!" Red shivered. "Go in and look at him, if you want to get icicles all over you. He could make the north pole look like a balmy day in June."

"Still mad, huh?"

"And how! I asked him at breakfast if I could have a nickel for a pencil and he almost bit my head off. I guess he told ma plenty too—for she's the one who got him into it."

"What are you going to do with the goat?" I asked.

"I was in hopes that pa would cool off overnight and tell me I could keep him. I guess though he'll have to go. Do you want him, Jerry?"

"I haven't any place to keep him. Mother wouldn't let me keep him anyway."

"Scoop and Peg haven't any place for him either, so I guess it's either Horse Foot or Grandma Carey's house for him."

"Did you ask Joe if he'd take him back?"

"Not yet. I'd rather keep him over at Horse Foot's, if we could."

"So he'll be nearer, huh?"

"Yes—for lodge night. Pa hadn't ought to kick about that. Anyway, there wouldn't have been any trouble at all if he and ma had kept out of here last night."

"Yes," I reminded, "and there wouldn't have been any trouble either if you had listened to me."

"All right, you've got a hall—go ahead and lecture!"

"Well, what did I tell you when your ma and pa were talking about hiding behind the curtain? Didn't I tell you to go in and invite them to stay? Didn't I tell you not to let them hide?"

"Oh, rats! Let's go hunt up Horse Foot and take Piledriver over there, if we can."

"We better get Mr. Rail's permission first—after what happened to him."

"Horse Foot can do that."

A door banged below as Mr. Meyers came

into the barn to get his car. He was limping, and, boy, did he look sour! We were careful not to let him see us peeking down.

Horse Foot agreeing to the plan, Red and I ran home that noon as soon as school was out to secretly move the goat down the alley to the other barn—but there wasn’t any goat to move! During the morning he either had gotten out of the barn himself and had wandered off, or someone had taken him off.

We put in all the time we dared that noon searching for him, picking up the search after school that night and continuing it the next day. But much less than getting the goat back, as we had hoped, we couldn’t find anybody who had seen him. There was something queer about it, and by Saturday Red and I were both convinced that the goat had been taken away and killed.

“I never thought your pa would do a thing like that,” I told Red.

“I didn’t either, Jerry,” he spoke, long-faced. “It makes me sick to think of it. Of course he was mad over what he got—I don’t blame him for that. But in a way it wasn’t Piledriver’s fault—he shouldn’t have been killed for it. It was cruel of pa. I’ll never forget it.”

"What'll we do now?" I asked. "Fix up a wooden goat for our next lodge meeting?"

"Let's not talk about it, Jerry. The way I feel now I don't care whether we ever have another lodge meeting or not. Gee, I wish pa hadn't done that! I always liked him so well—and had so much confidence in him."

Annie, with the others, brought her ladder to me for inspection the following lodge night. After what she had told me I naturally expected to find a stepful of black pegs. Instead she had nothing in her ladder but gold pegs.

"Well, what's the matter with it?" she asked me, flushing, as I studied it. "Do you think I cheated?"

"Not at all," I told her hastily, giving her a gold star with the others.

But I knew she *had* cheated. Her manner itself proved it. A change had come over her. Her eyes didn't dance any more—instead they were determined, almost hard. She had told me that she had lied about her father—she had said that until the story she had told us had been corrected she never could get a gold star. Yet here she was with a perfect ladder!—with no correction of any kind! It couldn't be anything else but cheating.

What was the mystery about her father? I

wondered as I watched her as the wooden goat that we had rigged up was brought in. She pretended to get just as much fun out of the new goat as the rest of us. But her laugh wasn't the same. It was like the new look in her eyes.

"Say, Red," I asked one day shortly before Christmas, "did your ma ever tell you anything about Annie's father?—where he died, or what he died of, or anything like that?"

"No, but I've heard ma and Aunt Pansy say he wasn't any good. All he brought Annie's mother was new trouble."

"But is he really dead? Do you know that?"

"Annie says he is."

"Yes, but she just as much as told me a short time ago that she had lied to us about him."

"Lied?" Red quickly picked up the word. "She got a gold star last week."

"I hate to say it about her, but I think she's cheating. Haven't you noticed a change in her recently?"

"I noticed she hasn't been hanging around you as much as usual," he grinned.

"She knows that I know the truth about her. That's why she avoids me."

Red rolled his eyes like a sick calf.

"Another blasted romance! Oh, cruel, cruel world!"

I let it pass.

"I'm almost sorry now that we initiated her," I told him.

"You shouldn't have given her a gold star just because she's a girl. She should be made to earn her stars like the rest of us. There shouldn't be any favoritism."

"What could I do? She had a perfect ladder. I didn't like to call her a liar to her face."

"Well, that settles it!" Red growled decisively. "If that's a sample of how girls act we don't want any more of them in our lodge. Maybe we can freeze her out too."

"She's had so much hard luck—I hate to do anything more to hurt her."

"If she's a cheater, she should expect it."

Grandma Carey called me up the afternoon before Christmas.

"We have a little girl over here, Jerry," the old lady told me in her kindly way, "who hasn't been acting right lately. I think she would like to have you come over, if you will."

"Who do you mean?—Annie?" I asked quickly.

"Yes. She has something to tell you."

Annie met me with red eyes.

"I let you think my father was dead, but he isn't," she ran quickly into her story, evi-

dently determined to get it over with and get back on the side of truth as quickly as possible. "Instead of being dead, he's in prison. I couldn't bear to tell you—I felt so bad about it. He was caught in a bank robbery just before Joe's birth. Joe thinks he's really dead. Mother told me all about it before she died. I should never have put those gold pegs in my ladder, Jerry. I wasn't entitled to the gold stars you gave me. I didn't cheat though to get gold stars—I just didn't want to tell you the truth. I thought I'd brazen it out. But I knew you knew I was cheating. It's been hurting me worse and worse, and to-day—"

Here she broke down completely, Grandma Carey sweeping her into her motherly arms.

"There, there, darling! You mustn't cry any more. It's you we love—what your father is, or what he did, doesn't make a particle of difference to us. No sensible person ever blames a child for its parents' misdeeds. Just be the same good little girl that you always have been and you'll find your life crowded with loyal, trusting friends. Jerry understands. You two will be better friends than ever."

"Sure we will," I put in eagerly.

Joe came running then, looking like a little old man in his new glasses.

"We're going to have a turkey to-morrow," he told me happily. "It's the first one we ever had."

"Yes," Annie picked up the story, composed now, "we were too poor to have turkeys when mother was alive. There were times when we hardly had bread. But mother did the best she could for us till the end came. We were taken to an orphanage then. It was a terrible place—so bleak and cheerless. We finally decided to run away and come to my aunt's house here. A farmer boy gave us a goat to carry our few little belongings. That's how we happened to have the goat, Jerry—I believe you asked me about it the other day. That's our whole true story this time."

Joe brought me out a tin monkey before I left at dusk.

"I bought it for you for Christmas," he told me, running it up and down its string.

On the way home I felt something in my coat pocket. It was some handkerchiefs from Annie, who had slipped the package into my pocket while Joe and I were playing with the monkey.

But better than the handkerchiefs to me was the look I had seen in Annie's eyes when I left. It was the same dancing look that had made me like her so well at the start.

CHAPTER XVIII

CONCLUSION

I STOPPED at Red's house on the way home. "Did you hear about my monkey?" I joked. "What monkey?" he asked, with his mouth full of Christmas candy.

"I got a monkey for Christmas," I told him. "Honest, Jerry?" his eyes swelled. "Gee, I wish it had been a goat instead."

"Here it is," I laughed, bringing it out and running it up and down its string.

"Oh, *that!*!" snorted Red, with his nose up. "I thought you meant a real monkey."

"Joe Kramer gave it to me. Boy, is he happy! They've got a turkey over there as big as a young hippopotamus—the first one that he and Annie ever had, they told me. It's a big Christmas for them. I can tell you something else too," I lowered my voice confidentially, "if you'll promise to keep it to yourself."

He pretended breathless interest.

"What?" he palpitated. "Are you and Annie at last engaged?"

"I wish you'd quit talking that way," I scowled. "I like Annie and she likes me—for that matter she likes you too. But it's just the way kids like each other—not lovers. I never try to get sweet around her—she wouldn't want me to either. There's plenty of time for that when we grow up."

"Can't you take a joke?" Red growled, reaching for more candy.

"It's getting stale," I told him. "I wish you'd give it a rest."

"But what's the big secret, Jerry?" he asked curiously.

I told him quietly what Annie had told me.

"The story of her father probably will get out sooner or later," I concluded, "but until it does I think you and I should keep it to ourselves. I'm not even going to tell Scoop and Peg. But as you talked of freezing her out of our lodge I thought I had better tell you, so you'd know what was behind her actions."

"How about those gold stars of hers in our Honor Book?" Red inquired.

"She asked me to take them out—but I think I'll let them stay. If I did take them out, Scoop and the others would just wonder about it, and start more talk."

Red then showed me some presents that had

come for him that afternoon by mail, Mrs. Meyers finally calling us into the kitchen where she was stuffing a turkey.

"Wipe off your mouth," she told Red, at sight of him.

"It's that green candy," he wiped.

"Yes," she stiffened, "I suppose you've been sitting in there beside that candy dish with one hand constantly in it. That's the only thing about Christmas I don't like—it usually means a doctor bill for us afterwards."

"Did you buy some nuts, ma?" Red asked, peeking into the pantry, where one whole shelf had been given over to the profusion of pies, cakes and salads that Mrs. Meyers had prepared in advance for the coming Christmas dinner.

"Yes, but you aren't going to get them till to-morrow—so come away from there. And don't you go slipping in there and nibbling on those salads either. I haven't forgotten the time I brought in those salads for your Aunt Pansy's party and found half the lettuce gone. Anybody could see you had been eating it. I never was so mortified in all my life!"

"Jerry got a monkey for Christmas, ma," Red laughed.

Mrs. Meyers straightened, startled.

"A monkey? Good heavens! Are we going to have one of those mischievous things climbing up in our trees next summer and scaring the wits out of us?"

"The only thing this one climbs up is a string," I told her, bringing it out and showing it off.

"What'd you get me for Christmas, ma?" Red began to tease, with an arm around her.

"You'll find out to-morrow."

"Tell me now, ma," he begged. "Please!"

"I said *to-morrow*," she spoke firmly.

Red gave a resigned sigh.

"I suppose it'll be another muffler or a book. I'd rather have a new goat."

Mrs. Meyers gave a funny little smile at that, but she didn't say anything. Nor had I the slightest idea then what had caused the smile —though I was soon to find out!

The turkey was fully stuffed now and Red held it while his mother sewed it together to keep the stuffing in, putting it finally into a big covered roaster all ready to go into the oven the following morning.

"Oh, boy!" smacked Red. "I can hardly wait. Isn't Christmas a grand time, Jerry?"

"It sure is," I agreed, with the same happiness.

"Yes," said Mrs. Meyers, sitting down wearily, "the poor wives and mothers put in days getting up a big meal that usually disappears in ten minutes. I sometimes wonder if it's worth all the effort involved."

"I'm going to eat longer than ten minutes," Red declared.

"Well, if you do," his mother laid the law down to him, "you'll eat much slower than usual. I know what happens when you stuff yourself. This year I'm going to keep an eye on you."

"When are you going to give me my presents, ma?" he began again.

"I told you to-morrow."

"Can't I have just one of them now?"

"I let you have those that came by mail to-day. Aren't you ever satisfied with anything at all?"

"Please, ma!" he coaxed.

"If I weren't so tired," she told him, "I'd take you across my knee and warm you up."

"No, you wouldn't," he laughed, hugging her. "You love me, and you wouldn't spank me on Christmas Eve. I know better than that."

A sudden familiar clatter on the back porch sent Red flying to the door with eyes as big as teacups.

"Jerry!" he cried, throwing open the door.
"It's Piledriver!"

Mr. Meyers came in grinning, the goat meekly following him.

"I bet this is one Christmas present you didn't expect," he told Red laughingly.

"Where did you get him, pa?" Red asked wonderingly.

"Oh," Mr. Meyers joked, "I brought him back to life."

Red flushed.

"I thought you had killed him, pa."

"Yes," Mr. Meyers spoke dryly. "I believe I did overhear you say something like that to Jerry a short time ago. So you thought the old man had gone in for cruelty to animals in a big way, huh?"

Red's flush deepened.

"Gee, pa, I'm awfully sorry. I'll never think anything like that about you again. I'm glad you didn't do it too. I—I don't think I ever could like you so well again if you ever did do anything like that."

"I couldn't expect you to, Donald," Mr. Meyers spoke gravely. "Cruelty to dumb animals is never excusable. I'll admit that I was pretty hot under the collar when your goat took after me that night in your lodge room, but I

got over it. I knew how much he meant to you, and not wanting to spoil your fun with him I decided to slip him off and make friends with him so that you could keep him here without further danger to myself. I've had him down town in the theatre basement. We're good friends now, aren't we, Piledriver?"

"Baa!" replied the goat, with the nearest thing to a grin that a goat could give.

Mrs. Meyers was fluttering around, worried.

"Get him out of here," she ordered nervously. "Goodness me!—we'll have that smell of his all through the house. Take him out right away."

Mr. Meyers chucked Red chummily in the ribs.

"Yes, Donald, take him out to the barn where he belongs—he's your responsibility from now on."

"Has he had supper, pa?" Red asked quickly.

"He doesn't look undernourished, does he?"

"I think I'll give him something more anyway, seeing as how this is Christmas Eve. Can I give him one of your salads, ma?"

Mrs. Meyers almost popped out of her shoes.

"Mercy me, no!" she gasped.

"I'll go without mine to-morrow. Please, ma! Gee, I'm so happy to get him back I'd even go without my turkey too."

Mr. Meyers gave his wife a meaning nudge.

"Yes," he said, in his jolly way, "let's celebrate the goat's return and give him his Christmas salad to-night. What do you say, Mother?"

"Oh, all right," Mrs. Meyers gave in, with a deep sigh.

Red flew first to his mother and then to his father, giving each a big hug, and then into the pantry where he turned the biggest salad there upside-down on a pie tin. It was hard for Mrs. Meyers to keep still, when he came out with it, but she did, even smiling with Mr. Meyers when we went out with the goat.

We met Horse Foot coming out of the barn.

"W-w-where did you get the goat?" he asked, surprised.

Red told him.

"We're going to take him in the barn and give him his Christmas salad," Red concluded, laughing.

"Let m-m-me have it," Horse Foot reached eagerly for the salad.

"Don't you eat any of it," Red admonished, giving it up.

Inside, Horse Foot started up the stairs to the lodge room.

"Hey!" Red called. "We're not going up there. We're going to feed him down here in his stall. Come on back with that salad."

Horse Foot kept right on, the lodge-room door closing behind him.

"Did you leave a fire in the stove?" I asked Red quickly.

"No, why?"

"There's a fire up there now," I told him. "I just saw it flicker as the door opened."

"Some of Horse Foot's work, I suppose. But how did he get in there anyway?"

"Let's go up and ask him," I suggested.

"Say, Jerry," Red spoke quickly, "do you remember the time we thought someone had been sleeping up there and burning our wood—but later concluded pa had taken the wood?"

"Yes, I remember."

"I asked him about it afterwards, but he said he never took any of our wood. I meant to tell you, Jerry. I've thought ever since that there *was* someone up there that night."

I stretched my ears.

"Horse Foot's talking to someone up there now," I said excitedly.

Red quickly tied the goat and started up.

"Come on, Jerry," he called to me.

"G-g-go ahead and eat it if you're hungry," we heard Horse Foot say, when we stopped outside the closed door.

"Where did you get it, sonny?" a deep gruff voice came to us through the door.

"From the b-b-boy who lives here."

"Don't you live here?"

"N-n-no, I live at the other end of the block."

"Where is this other boy?—and what's his name?"

"He's d-d-downstairs. His name is Red Meyers. S-s-shall I call him?"

"He'll probably put me out when he finds me here," came bitterly.

"On Christmas E-e-eve?" Horse Foot spoke with surprise. "No, he wouldn't p-p-put you out in the cold on Christmas Eve."

Red got my ear.

"Who is it, Jerry?" he asked wonderingly.
"Did you recognize the voice?"

"No, I never heard the voice before. Probably it's some old bum that Horse Foot picked up."

"Do you suppose it's the same bum who slept here before?" Red asked, beginning to get huffy.

"Maybe. Let's go in and find out."

Horse Foot jumped up as we entered.

"H-h-here's Red now," he told a stooped, shabby-looking man who sat eating the salad beside the fire.

"Who are you?" Red stepped up sharply.
"What are you doing here?"

"H-h-he's Annie's father," Horse Foot put in, before the man could speak for himself.

"Who?" Red stared. "Who did you say?"

The man got up to go, the fire lighting his wrinkled, worn face.

"Wait a minute," I stopped him, struck by the misery in his manner and hoping that remorse over his past life had caused it. "Are you really Annie Kramer's father?"

Here Annie herself flew in, Horse Foot having phoned her that her father was there. Then Mr. and Mrs. Meyers wonderingly came in. But after a few minutes we all quietly went out, leaving Annie and her father alone together.

I'll always remember what a beautiful clear starry night it was—so crisp and cold and snowy—and how beautiful the chimes sounded as they pealed forth in one of the near-by churches. There was joyous singing too as a group of warmly-clad Christmas carolers came by.

Just what passed that night between Annie

and her sorrowful, repentant father will always be their own secret. To-day they have a happy little home of their own beside Grandma Carey, and while Mr. Kramer's prison record will always be held against him by some of the more severe townspeople, no one in Tutter can say that he isn't doing everything in his power to make amends for his earlier misspent life.

Some people predicted that he would get Annie's and Joe's money and then clear out to his old haunts, but I happen to know that he hasn't touched a penny of their money. The little family is living wholly on the money he earns himself in Dad's brickyard. He even plans on putting his two children through college when they are old enough.

Getting out of prison in September, he learned at his old home that his motherless children had been taken to an orphanage from which they later had run away. It had taken him several weeks to trace them to Tutter—and when he finally found them there he learned that they were well taken care of through their inheritance and had no need of his intended support. He wanted to start life over again with them and take care of them. Following Annie to our lodge room the night

before her initiation, he had later let himself in there with a skeleton key, sleeping there comfortably and leaving for Chicago early the following morning. He had planned then never to return, not wanting his children to feel the disgrace of his prison record in their new home. But with Christmas coming on, he longed to see them again, if only through a window, intending to sleep in the lodge room as before, but this time bumping into Horse Foot there.

The rest you know.

Which just about brings me to the end of my story. The unfortunate parrot woman is still confined to the state insane asylum, a pitiful figure, but well taken care of there. Her property by the river may be made over into a summer Boy Scout camp—there has been considerable talk of that around Tutter and extensive investigation of the property by state Scout officials. The light we saw in the ballroom window that night was the parrot woman herself moving about up there with a candle, just before starting for town.

Horse Foot still has the post-card that Annie sent him. I asked him one day how he happened to detect the pin pricks in the card, but he couldn't tell me sensibly. When I pressed him

for an answer he said "P-p-pickled pigs feet!" and laughed. Anyway, it was pretty clever of him to have noticed the pin pricks, whether his detection of them was accidental or not.

I sometimes wonder if he isn't a better detective than I am!

Mrs. Meyers had predicted, you remember, that our Up-the-Ladder lodge might sweep the country. That of course remains to be seen, but I'll say this about our lodge in conclusion: We never had anything in Tutter that brought the boys and girls there more fun. Yes, we've taken in a lot of girls, after Annie, and almost thirty boys. We have a big lodge now. Feeling that the lodge was doing a lot of good, the local Chamber of Commerce even offered us the use of a regular lodge room down town, but when we put it to a vote—whether to move or keep on using Red's barn—every member voted in favor of the barn.

In my next book there's going to be a lot of fun—the title is, JERRY TODD'S POODLE PARLOR, and it's the hilarious story of us running (or trying to run!) a beauty parlor for cats and dogs!

Can't you see the fun there? Well, you'll get the story shortly, and I can promise you that

there *will* be fun in it, just heaps and heaps of fun—and mystery too!

Until then, so-long!

THE END

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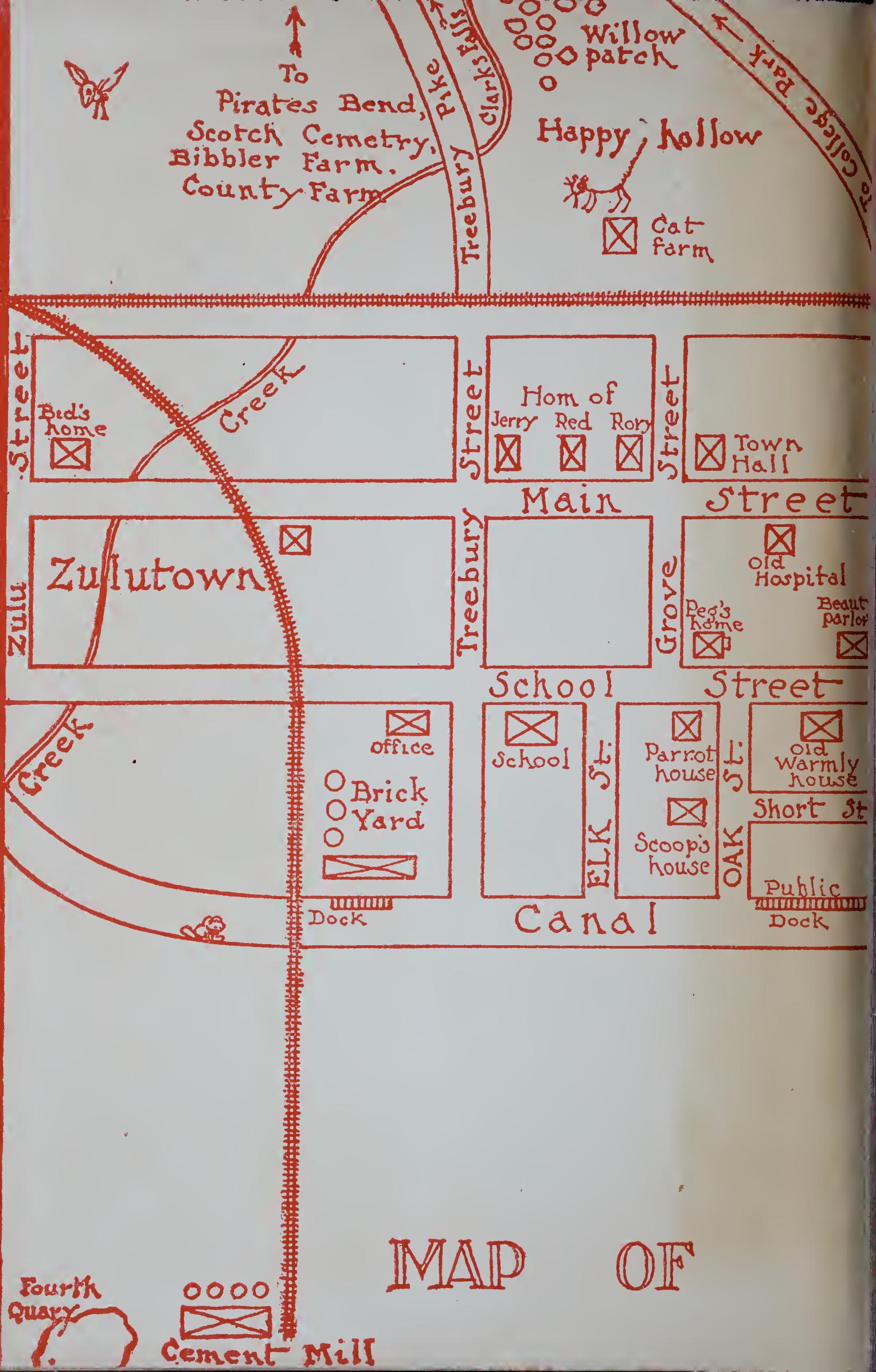
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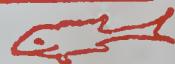
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